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The Aim of Dialectics in Plato's *Euthyphro*

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The Aim of Dialectics in Plato's *Euthyphro*

by

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The Aim of Dialectics in Plato's *Euthyphro*

by

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This dissertation presents an analysis of Plato's dialogue on piety, the *Euthyphro*. The aim of the dissertation is to understand the nature of piety and its connection with morality. Chapter One introduces the topic of the dissertation, discusses two aspects of its political relevance, and justifies the decision to turn to Plato, and specifically Plato's *Euthyphro*, for guidance on the question. Two weaknesses of contemporary approaches to the investigation of piety are discussed here, in order to highlight by contrast the strengths of Plato's approach. Chapters Two and Three present an analysis of Plato's *Euthyphro*, with special attention to what the dialogue can reveal about the connection between piety and morality. Chapter Four is a conclusion discussing the limitations of the study, the understanding of piety conveyed by Plato's *Euthyphro*, and the aim of Socratic dialectics, understood as a means of testing whether moral opinions might be a condition of pious experiences.

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Chapter One:
Political Life and the Study of Piety

The human being is the most god-fearing of all creatures, according to two characters in dialogues written by Plato (*Tim.* 41e, *Laws* 902b). But what is the character of the human belief in God or gods? Does piety among human beings have a nature, an essential character, with knowable limits? Or are human religious beliefs, and the gods who are believed to exist, perhaps infinitely malleable in their character?

The topic of this dissertation is Plato's understanding of piety, and especially his understanding of the connection between piety and morality. Before presenting the strengths of Plato as a guide in exploring this topic, I want to discuss two ways in which the question of the nature of piety, and its connection (or lack thereof) to morality, might be relevant to political life in a liberal democracy.

Tocqueville and the Health of Democracy

According to Alexis de Tocqueville, religious faith is essential to democratic health. "Despotism can do without faith, but not liberty" (2010, 478); "among all dogmatic beliefs,

the most desirable seem to me to be dogmatic beliefs in the matter of religion" (743, cf. 716); "Christianity must at all cost be maintained within the new democracies" (962). Why is faith, in Tocqueville's estimation, so important for democratic health?

We can understand the political importance of faith, in Tocqueville's understanding, by reflecting on the diseases he considers endemic to democracy. Three of those diseases are short-sightedness (155, 336, 370, 884), the decay of mores, which results partly from materialism (746), and the individualism that paves the way for soft despotism (884, 1251-55). Religion, counteracting each of these tendencies, trains the citizens of a democracy to behave "with the future in view" (966), raises their sights from a carnival of petty and materialistic enjoyments toward the contemplation of the noble and sublime (746), and encourages civic engagement (746).

Let us consider more fully the role of religion in combating the decay of mores and in preventing individualism. In Tocqueville's view, religion helps to maintain the national moral character. For religion dictates a common understanding of "the duties of men toward one another… What is most important for society is not so much that all citizens profess the true religion but that they profess a religion … [religion] directs mores, and it is by regulating the family that it works to regulate the State. I do not doubt for an instant that the great severity of mores that is noticed in the United States has its primary source in beliefs" (473). In addition, religion prevents the materialism and atomization so typical within democracies. Equality suggests "very dangerous instincts to men; it tends to isolate them from one another and to lead each one of them to be interested only in himself alone. It opens their souls excessively to love of material enjoyments. The greatest advantage of religions is to inspire entirely opposite instincts" by elevating souls, imposing duties, and dragging man "out of contemplation of himself" (746). To a great extent, religion even prevents soft

despotism, not only by turning the gaze of the citizens toward a standard higher and nobler than that of material well-being—the passion for which may pave the road to despotism—but also by encouraging a local participatory spirit: religion *as* a form of civic association can become the secondary power necessary as a bulwark against administrative centralization. All in all, "religious peoples are naturally strong precisely in the places where democratic peoples are weak; this makes very clear how important it is for men to keep their religion while becoming equal" (746).

If religion is so important for democratic health, then the durability of faith will to some extent, perhaps to a great extent, determine the durability of democracy. To understand Tocqueville's diagnosis of democracy, then, we must answer the following question: how durable, in Tocqueville's understanding, is religious faith?

To answer this question, we must look at Tocqueville's account of the nature of piety. In discussing the nature of piety, Tocqueville focuses on piety's origin or what we may call its "seed." The seed of piety is, he writes, "a natural distaste for existence and an immense desire to exist." The distaste for existence seems to be the result of the limitedness of life as we experience it on this earth: "Never will the short space of sixty years enclose all of the imagination of man; the incomplete joys of this world will never be enough for his heart." Because it instinctively "scorns life and fears nothingness," the soul of man is constantly pushed "toward the contemplation of another world, and it is religion that leads him there" (482). The seed of piety, then, would seem to be an awareness of the limitedness of life in this world, paired with the intense desire to escape the bounds of our mortality.

Luckily for democracy, this seed and its fruit, piety, are natural and enduring: "religion is only a particular form of hope, and it is as natural to the human heart as hope itself." Men abandon faith "by a type of mental aberration and with the help of a kind of moral violence

exercised over their own nature … an irresistible inclination brings them back to beliefs. Unbelief is an accident; faith alone is the permanent state of humanity" (482). And in a later chapter entitled "Why Americans Exhibit So Excited a Spiritualism," Tocqueville reiterates his position on the naturalness of faith: "Man has not given himself the taste for the infinite and the love of what is immortal. These sublime instincts do not arise from a caprice of the will; they have their unchanging foundation in his nature; they exist despite his efforts. He can hinder and deform them, but not destroy them" (941).

If religious faith is natural and durable, even permanent, and serves as a bulwark for democratic health, then our confidence in the durability of democracy would seem to be well-founded, at least in this respect. But we might raise two questions about Tocqueville's account of the seed of piety.

First, there is the question of its accuracy. Is it true that the awareness of mortality is natural to man? Or, even if that awareness is in some way natural, is it possible that a certain type of political arrangement might distract human beings from that awareness, to the point that faith would lose much of its appeal and no longer be "the permanent state of humanity"? Indeed, some modern political philosophers seem to have implied that such a tactic of distraction would be possible and beneficial. As Montesquieu puts it, instead of drawing the attention of human beings toward the problem of death, "a more certain way to attack a religion is by favor, by the comforts of life, by the hope of fortune; not by what reminds one of [the fear of death], but by what makes one forget it" (1951, 25.12, as quoted in Bartlett 2002, 533). If the awareness of mortality can to some extent be lost or buried, perhaps the durability of faith is not, after all, assured. Moreover, Tocqueville's account of the seed of piety might be inaccurate or incomplete in another way. For even if the awareness of mortality is natural and permanent for human beings, is it true that a hope to

escape mortality, by itself, can and will lead to faith? Is it true, in other words, that a mere hope, unmediated by other opinions or concerns, can give rise to a durable belief in the attainability of the object of the hope? In fact, Tocqueville himself may suggest otherwise. For he recognized that in his own century, religious faith seemed to be on the wane: "Don't you see that religions are growing weaker … Don't you see, on all sides, beliefs giving way to reasoning, and sentiments, to calculation?" (391). Indeed, it is "today the natural state of man in matters of religion" that "an accidental and particular cause," namely "the intimate union of politics and religion," "prevents the human spirit from following its inclination" toward faith (487). And when certain "negative doctrines" silently undermine religious belief, leaving nothing to replace it, "you see men who allow, as if by forgetfulness, the object of their most cherished hopes to escape. Carried along by an imperceptible current against which they do not have the courage to struggle, but to which they yield with regret, they abandon the faith that they love to follow the doubt that leads them to despair" (485-6). Do these men, who abandon faith, simply forget the object of their most cherished hopes? Or is their regret and despair perhaps a sign that they *maintain* an awareness, perhaps even a deep awareness, of their desire to escape the bounds or their mortality, while refusing to give in to the comforts of faith, which now appear to them illusory? If the awareness of mortality—paired with the cynicism or probity inculcated by a certain kind of political, social, or intellectual climate—can give rise not to faith but rather to despair, then perhaps faith is, once again, not as durable as Tocqueville's account of piety's seed would lead us to hope. Not only the mass distraction from the problem of death, then, but also a widespread skepticism about the hope for a solution to that problem, might impede the blooming of piety from what Tocqueville takes to be its natural seed.

We might also raise a second question. Even if Tocqueville's account of piety's seed is

accurate—that is, even if the human awareness of mortality and the limitedness of life on this earth can be depended on to give rise to faith—can that seed be depended on to give rise to a faith that is civically healthy? By a faith that is civically healthy, I mean a belief in some kind of divinity that supports moral behavior and civic engagement. For Tocqueville's account of the benefits of religion for a democracy seems to hinge on the assumption that all religions will support moral engagement in political or social life. Indeed, he seems confident that they will: there is not "any religion that does not impose on each man some duties toward the human species or in common with it, and that does not in this way drag him, from time to time, out of contemplation of himself" (745-6). If religion is necessarily a *moral* force—that is, if the gods who are plausible objects of belief will necessarily require or support some kind of moral action, or some awareness of moral duty, on the part of human beings—then faith may indeed be counted on to serve as a bulwark against the materialistic decay of mores and the advent of individualism. But why is Tocqueville so confident that an amoral faith could not arise and become widespread? By an amoral faith, I mean a faith which required nothing more than selfishness—perhaps by imposing only the 'duty' of particular rituals meant to bribe or appease the gods, perhaps by imposing no duties at all—on the part of its adherents.[1]

Indeed, two considerations seem to point to the possibility of such a faith. First, Tocqueville's account of piety's seed made no reference to morality. Religious faith has its origin in the dissatisfaction with the limitedness of life and the desire to escape mortality. Presumably, any creed or doctrine which promised to solve the problem of mortality could be appealing and engender robust belief. An amoral faith would seem, in this regard, fully satisfactory. And second, despite his apparent confidence that all religions impose duties

[1] Of course, not all 'moral' faiths would be civically healthy. Supporting moral action would be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for civically-healthy faith.

toward humanity and draw men out of the contemplation of themselves, Tocqueville himself appears to have feared the rise of an amoral faith, in the form of pantheism. By destroying individuality and allowing the mind to embrace all things in the universe simultaneously, as a unity, the doctrine of pantheism flatters and strongly attracts the democratic mind (757-8). Indeed, pantheism is the philosophic system "most likely to seduce the human mind in democratic centuries" (758). Despite its destruction of human individuality and its apparent lack of moral demands, pantheism, according to which all things (including particular human beings) are parts of a single immense and eternal being, now poses such a threat that "all those who remain enamored of the true grandeur of man must join forces and struggle against it" (758). Of course, Tocqueville himself seems to have been even more apprehensive about the threat posed by outbreaks of traditional religiosity in fanatical forms (939-941). But given his account of piety's seed, we might wonder why. In other words, if piety has its origin in a dissatisfaction with mortality, and amoral faiths like pantheism can promise to cure that dissatisfaction, and to cure it in ways that are especially enticing to the democratic mind, might not pantheism, or some other amoral faith, present a serious danger to democratic health? If the seed of piety can give rise to a faith that makes no moral demands on its adherents, and fosters neither duties toward other human beings nor civic engagement, then perhaps the durability of faith implies very little about the durability of democracy.

But we cannot rest satisfied with this analysis. For even if we have arrived, on the basis of Tocqueville's account of the nature of piety, at certain doubts as to the durability of piety in forms that will serve as a bulwark for democratic health, it is possible, as discussed above, that Tocqueville's account of the nature of piety was inaccurate or incomplete. Perhaps piety cannot be characterized simply as a hope to escape mortality. If there is some natural or

essential connection between piety and morality, perhaps the doubts to which we have been led, which concern the rise of an amoral faith, are misplaced. A fuller consideration of the nature of piety and its connection to morality, then, may shed light on the durability of democracy, or may alter the character of our concerns.

One might object, of course, that Tocqueville never intended to give a full account of piety's seed. His offhand remarks on the topic cannot be assumed to be an adequate representation of his considered view. But in that case, the problem, though slightly altered, will remain. For Tocqueville does not provide us with any theoretical resources, within his work, that would lead us to anticipate the endurance of piety in a civically healthy form. Yet that endurance is critical, in his own account, to the health of democracy. We would need to supplement his incomplete account of piety's seed, then, and discover an account that is more complete, in order to assuage or confirm the doubts to which his own reflections have led us on that score.

Lilla and the Fragility of Liberalism

The question of the nature of piety, and its connection to morality, might be relevant not only to the health of democracy but also to the fragility of liberalism. In his book *The Stillborn God*, intellectual historian Mark Lilla presents his readers with a disturbing thesis. Our modern world—and with it, all liberal polities, including our own—is fragile (2007, 7). Liberal modernity is fragile because it has a strong and permanent rival: political *theology*, which "stands as a perennial alternative to the kind of thinking that inspired the modern institutions we now take for granted" (8). It was Thomas Hobbes who first cordoned off theology from its influence over politics; this 'Great Separation' defines modern liberalism

and indeed remains "the most distinctive feature of the modern West to this day" (58). But the Great Separation is shaky, not only because of the perennial allure of political theology, but because Hobbes's account of religious psychology, upon which the Great Separation depends, is simpleminded (300, 303).

What is Hobbes's account of religious psychology? According to Hobbes, man's natural passions combine with his ignorance to create anxiety for the future, out of which piety grows (78-79). On this view, religion may be cordoned off from the political realm, because piety has no essential connection with morality or politics.[2] Piety stems from insecurities and confusions which can largely be eliminated through increased security, material comfort, and public enlightenment. But Lilla claims that Rousseau, and later Kant, by recognizing the connection between the seed of piety and moral hope, moral despair, and the conscience, revealed Hobbes's psychological account—and with it, his Great Separation—to be extremely tenuous (131). For religion, as their insights revealed, "is simply too entwined with our moral experience ever to be disentangled from the things touching on morality," which include many political matters; religion cannot be "banished to a compartment of one's inner life" (131), for the moral implications of the "divine nexus" of God, man, and world (158) are always relevant to disputes over political action and authority (21-22). As an indirect and eventual result of their insights, a new political theology bloomed from the heart of modernity (11, 294-95), proving the fragility of Hobbes's hope. Piety cannot be 'tamed' or depoliticized, for it is entwined, even at its most basic or natural level,

[2] Religion is not to be completely cordoned off from the political realm, for the Hobbesian sovereign retains control of all "government of doctrines" (*Leviathan* XVIII.16). But this is not a concession to religion's influence over politics, but rather its subjugation. Religion *as* religion, as an independent force, is largely erased from political life, and replaced by religion as a tool.

with opinions about and concerns for justice, which cannot be stripped away—and which are always politically relevant.

This is Lilla's thesis. But he does not elaborate his reasons for deferring to Rousseau and Kant; that is, his reasons for calling Hobbes's religious psychology simplistic. Though understandable—such speculation is beyond the scope of his book—this lacuna turns out to be critical. How is Lilla so sure that Rousseau and Kant were right about piety? Did they truly improve upon Hobbes's account? Perhaps their insights described not the natural seed of piety, but rather its historically conditioned, or even specifically Christian, expression. Each of them appealed to and bolstered, though in new ways, old Christian concepts (121-127, 144-146). Lilla himself admits that much of Kant's thinking had more to do with St. Paul than with rationalism (146). Perhaps the ideas of Rousseau and Kant, and their eventual influence, represented not an unveiling of the *nature* of piety, but a foolish reversion to old habits. Before Hobbes's project of Enlightenment could reach fruition—before traditional piety could be eliminated, or at least, through dilution, channeled far from the moral-political realm—Rousseau and Kant reopened the door to non-rational sentiment and intuition (121), conscience understood as the voice of God (127), sin (144), and even revelation as a political force. The natural seed of religion, as a fear born of day-to-day insecurity, could have, in time, been revealed and largely addressed. In short, Hobbes might have been correct about the natural seed of piety and the malleability of its expression. How can we judge his understanding to be flawed if his project was, midway, subverted by a reversion to Christian tendencies cloaked as philosophy?

Because it is beyond the scope of Lilla's inquiry to justify his position on the nature of piety, rather than its merely conventional or Christian manifestations, his thesis remains uncertain. Is it true that political theology poses a permanent threat? Before we can diagnose

liberal modernity, and the Great Separation on which it depends, as perennially fragile, we must understand something more about the nature of piety; we must determine, especially, whether piety does in fact, as Lilla claims, have some essential connection with morality. And we must clarify, as Lilla does not, the character of that connection or "entwining." If Hobbes was right about piety, in conceiving of it as a product of ignorance and non-moral anxieties which may be largely addressed in this life or in this world, then liberalism may have far less to fear from political theology than Lilla claims.

Plato's Strengths

If our topic is the nature of piety, and especially the connection between piety and morality, why should we turn to Plato for guidance? Why, in particular, should we pass over the guidance provided by more contemporary sources? Plato has two main strengths as a guide on this topic: his openness, as evidenced by his depiction of dialectical inquiries, and his seriousness about the question of piety.

But before turning to those strengths, so as to clarify their character and importance, I want to address two potential weaknesses of Plato as a guide. For one might object that Plato's guidance on the topic of piety cannot be adequate, since he lacks two things. First, he lacks the "historical sense," or the awareness of the essentially historical character of all values and even all truth. The historical sense is what allows modern people to see, as Plato could not, that there cannot be one truth about divinity, nor one truth about the "nature" of piety among human beings, for there is no absolute truth or nature, but only a series of truths that emerge and change through history. As an Ancient Greek, as a metaphysician and a moralist, Plato gives credence to forms of absolutism that now seem to us fantastic.

Second, he lacks an awareness of modern science, which, by understanding the universe as fundamentally constituted by matter, and by casting light on human beings and their origins through an understanding of evolutionary biology, renders Plato's guidance obsolete. How can a man who never spoke of the evolutionary advantages of piety be trusted as a guide in understanding the phenomenon itself?

I want to argue that these ostensible weaknesses of Plato as a guide to the question of piety are, in fact, additional strengths. To do so, I must digress briefly in order to analyze the character, and the pitfalls, of two contemporary doctrines: relativism and scientism. For it seems to me that a belief in the historical character of values or truth, and a confidence in the methods and conclusions of modern science, far from enabling an open investigation of the character of piety, can in fact impede that investigation by leading to a dogmatic dismissal of piety and the pious. The dismissal of piety characteristic of relativism differs from the dismissal of piety characteristic of scientism, and I will discuss each doctrine, and each dismissal, in turn. The discussion of the weaknesses or biases of these contemporary doctrines will, I hope, serve two purposes. First, the discussion should illuminate, by contrast, the strengths of Plato's approach. For Plato's approach not only avoids these particular biases, but also includes safeguards against biased inquiry as such. And second, it should alert us, as human beings influenced knowingly or unknowingly by these contemporary doctrines, to potential biases in our own thinking, biases which could impede the open investigation of the nature of piety.

In order to understand why a doctrine might lead to a dismissal of piety, rather than to a fair investigation of it, we must first understand the doctrine itself. What is relativism? Let us consider the position as it is illuminated by its foremost contemporary proponent, Richard Rorty, who calls his variant of relativism "ironism."[3] Rorty begins from a critique of the "correspondence" theory of truth, the theory that sentences are true by virtue of their correspondence to some state of affairs in the world. The correspondence theory falters, according to Rorty, because "the world does not speak. Only we do" (1989, 6). In other words, there is no "truth" "out there" to which our sentences might latch on or correspond, no way to bridge the gap between "language and the nonlinguistic" (105). The idea of correspondence becomes all the more questionable when applied, not merely to sentences, but to "language games" or vocabularies as wholes. A given vocabulary is not "already out there in the world, waiting for us to discover it;" the world does not speak Aristotelian any more than it speaks Newtonian (6). The formation of a particular vocabulary, with its myriad emphases and shadings, is an act of construction, human creativity, and imposition: "since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths" (21). Because vocabularies are historically contingent, it seems, so are truths.[4] All truth is historical rather than timeless. There is no timeless truth, for instance, about human nature or about God. In other words, Rorty is an "anti-essentialist." He denies the distinction between the apparent

[3] In certain works, Rorty shied away from the label "relativism" on the grounds that his postmodernism, unlike relativism, has no "metanarrative" (1991, 202). But he later embraced the label, if not all of its connotations (2011, 11-17). For a critique of his attempt to distance himself from the label, see Bernstein 1990, 56-57.

[4] For an analysis of Rorty's logic here, see the discussion in Cleveland 1995, 220-225.

and the real (2005, 30). What is apparent—to a particular, historically situated culture engaged in a particular, historically contingent language game—is all we could possibly mean by the word "real." Because a given language game or vocabulary has total power in determining the perspective and the preferences, and thus even the identities, of its users (1989, 7), there can be no comprehensive perspective or standard by which different vocabularies may be judged; there is "nothing which validates a person's or a culture's final vocabulary" (197, cf. 80). Truth becomes a matter of coherence within a language game, rather than correspondence between a language and "the world." For Rorty, there is no nature, if we mean by nature what exists independently of human belief or convention.

Ironists, in particular, are called by that name "because their realization that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies," makes them "never quite able to take themselves seriously" (73). A vocabulary *creates* the world in which we live. Ironists, therefore, no longer see "the search for a final vocabulary as (even in part) a way of getting something distinct from this vocabulary right. They do not take the point of discursive thought to be *knowing*" (75). The ironist, unlike the essentialist or the metaphysician, "thinks nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence" (74). In particular, there is no human nature, for "there is nothing to people except what has been socialized into them" (177, cf. 185 and xiii).

One can imagine why a relativist might be inclined to dismiss the existence of God and (thereby) the claims of the pious. Rorty's theory of ironism, like other forms of relativism, includes the belief that there is no one absolute truth about the human condition or the universe. But the pious almost always claim that there is such a truth: what God understands, and what he imparts of His understanding to those who believe in Him, is

timelessly true. That means that a theorist who is committed to ironism, or to another form of relativism, will be committed to a dismissal of the claims of the pious and a dismissal of piety as it understands itself. To a committed relativist, almost every form of piety must be an instance of confusion, a slippage into the outmoded belief in absolute truth about what exists, what does not exist, what is good, and what is bad.

But perhaps Rorty has a response to that critique. Perhaps his denial of the claims of the pious is not, after all, a mere dismissal, but rather the result of a reasoned argument against the existence of God. We might expect such an argument, since, as implied above, it is crucial to Rorty's position that God not exist. Indeed, he all but admits that his philosophy of anti-essentialism hinges upon the non-existence of divine beings:

> The very idea that the world or the self has an intrinsic nature – one which the physicist or the poet may have glimpsed – is a remnant of the idea that the world is a divine creation, the work of someone who had something in mind, who Himself spoke some language in which He described His own project. Only if we have some such picture in mind, some picture of the universe as either itself a person or as created by a person, can we make sense of the idea that the world has an 'intrinsic nature.' (1989, 21)

If God, in other words, is not just one more human construction but rather the omniscient and eternal creator of the universe—if His language is not just one more language game but rather the truth about the whole—then essentialism is not merely a "remnant" but rather *the* timeless truth, and Rorty's edifice collapses.

But Rorty seems confident that God is not a problem. As he asserts: "neither man in general nor Europe in particular has a destiny, nor does either stand to any larger-than-human figure as a poem stands to its author" (1989, 119). "God is an artifact of early cosmology" (2007, 14fn.7). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was a battle between science and religion, and "it was a good thing for both religion and science that

science won that battle" (2005, 39).[5] But why is Rorty so confident? On what grounds does he assert that God does not exist or (what amounts to the same thing) is not worth thinking much about?

In the essay "Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God," Rorty presents his most sustained and explicit encounter with the question of God. There he argues, endorsing the position of Robert Brandom, that the question of God's existence is not prior to, but rather identical to the question of the social utility of the belief in His existence (2007, 14, cf. 10-11). Truth is equivalent to social utility. Religious believers who would resist this principle—which Rorty calls "the ontological priority of the social"—are silenced on the grounds that, as Brandom would claim, "all attempts to name an authority which is superior to that of society are disguised moves in the game of cultural politics. That is what they *must* be, because it is the only game in town" (8).

Yet this claim is immediately qualified or retracted, as Rorty goes on to explain: "in saying that it is the only such game, Brandom is not claiming to have made an empirical discovery, much less to have revealed a 'conceptual necessity.' He is, I would claim, articulating a cultural-political stance by pointing to the social advantages of his account of authority" (8).

But this last suggestion presents us with a difficulty. For it means that the truth of the thesis at issue—namely, the thesis that would posit the ontological priority of the social, which was used to silence the objections of believers—is supported only by its social utility. But its social utility is a consideration which would count as evidence for the truth of the thesis only if we had already accepted the thesis as valid. That is: if we accept the claim that

[5] See also the introduction to his early book *Consequences of Pragmatism*: "the issue between religion and secularism" has been decided, and "it was important that it got decided as it did" (1982, xliii).

the true is the useful, then we will consider it true (because useful). As Rorty puts it, with regard to his own position: "I want to argue that cultural politics should replace ontology, and also that whether it should or not is *itself* a matter of cultural politics" (5). In other words, the replacement of ontology is justified by a consideration that becomes valid only upon having executed the replacement of ontology. The systems offered by Brandom and Rorty, justified by no consideration apart from their own assumptions, are self-contained and self-sustaining; they pull themselves up by the bootstraps. There is no reason to accept them as true unless we have already chosen to accept their truth, as a matter of will.

But if we adopt this standard, *any* self-contained language game or system of assumptions will be equally weighty: even the language games preferred by the religious fundamentalists whom Brandom and Rorty hope to debunk. Seen in this light, ironism in general (or relativism), when its denial of the possibility of absolute truth is applied to itself, might become merely one more perspective, one more conviction, a "private fantasy" (1989, 125) with no privileged status or capacity to pass judgment upon competing perspectives or convictions. But this would mean that a true or consistent ironist would have to admit his incapacity to deny the truth of any particular moral or political conviction, including those convictions that would assert the existence of God or gods.[6]

In any event, it is clear that Rorty's own attempt to justify his denial of the existence of God is not convincing. It relies on a circularity, as we have seen. Why, then, does Rorty rest satisfied with such a thin justification of his answer to what is perhaps the most important

[6] On this incapacity, see also Owen 2001, 36-39. Indeed, the theory of truth that Rorty offers might even support or in a sense *prove* the existence of God. Rorty appears to waver as to whether truth is established by social utility or by social fiat. But whichever definition we adopt—whether something becomes true because it is *useful* to believe, or because it *is* believed—we might be led back to faith. Whenever the belief in God (or in absolutism generally) happened to become more useful for society, or more widespread, then a believer would be correct in asserting God's existence.

question of human life? I would argue that his commitment to relativism impedes an open and sustained investigation of the question of God and the nature of piety. Not only by denying that piety (or human beings) can have a nature, and not only by denying the existence of timeless moral truths, but especially by denying, implicitly or explicitly, God's existence from the outset, a proponent of contemporary relativism, like Rorty, might skew or bias the inquiry into piety, assuming from the outset that what he is investigating is an instance of confusion or false hope.

Plato was not a relativist. To select him as the guide in our investigation of piety, then, should help us overcome the assumptions which are perhaps implicit in that doctrine. But the selection of Plato as a guide, by itself, may not be sufficient to insulate us from those assumptions. For there is still another danger, namely that we might carry our own relativism *with* us and impose it on Plato's dialogues. An example of this approach is provided by Michel Despland's *The Education of Desire: Plato and the Philosophy of Religion*. While Despland provides an interesting account of the didactic goal of Socrates' conversations—for instance, the goal of convincing interlocutors to be more reasonable and virtuous—his account of Plato's understanding of piety, and of Socrates' investigation of it, is clouded by his refusal to take seriously the possibility that one religion has unique access to the truth, along with his apparent imposition of that refusal on Plato and his Socrates. As Despland describes his subject: "there is no religiosity without some concrete, specific believing and doing"; a religion should be understood as "a historical reality" (1985, xi). And this understanding of religiosity and religion cannot help but affect his understanding of Plato, who, according to Despland, "can inaugurate a philosophy of religion that has much to say because, caught between mysticism and politics, he has turned with eager curiosity to the historical, the mythical, the social." But an eager concentration upon what is of merely historical, mythical,

or social interest may in fact impede an open investigation of the natural, the cosmic, and the divine.

Part of the problem with Despland's analysis of Plato, and with other analyses of the same type, may be the use of the word 'religion.' For that word itself may have taken on relativistic connotations—may be, in a sense, both too tolerant and too intolerant. Its tolerance consists in its implicit acceptance of all creeds under a single label which may be easily put into the plural: there are many religions. But this confident and easy acceptance of multiplicity or diversity, as tolerant as it may seem at first blush, implies a more fundamental intolerance or dogmatism: that no *one* religion is uniquely correct, that all are fundamentally similar human institutions competing with one another in a global marketplace of ideas. But it is of the essence of serious religious belief to claim unique access to the truth; given the jarring differences between the various creeds, it is almost unthinkable that more than one of them, much less all of them, could be simultaneously correct. Thus the term 'religion,' by too easily tolerating multiplicity at the expense of taking seriously any one claim to privileged access to the truth about divinity, is better replaced by the term 'piety.' This latter term—as is shown, in the first place, by its awkwardness when put into the plural—is more amenable to the claim that only one account of the cosmos, divinity, and man's relationship to divinity is correct—and thus that *only* a belief in that particular account can be called a virtue. The Greeks, being supremely pious, had no word for religion. And if we ourselves are uneasy about the word 'piety,' and more comfortable with a discussion of 'religions,' that may to some extent reflect our own uneasiness about claims to absolute truth.[7]

[7] In my analysis of Plato, I will attempt to use the word 'piety' and avoid the words 'religion' and 'religiosity.'

Scientism and the Dismissal of Piety

An awareness of modern science would seem to be a necessity for any serious investigation of piety. Plato lacks that awareness. But his lack of awareness of modern science might in fact insulate him from certain biases, the biases of scientism, which might lead to a dismissal of the phenomenon of piety. What is scientism, and why might it, like relativism, create an impediment to the serious and open-minded investigation of piety?

Scholars have recently come to identify scientism as an important part of the contemporary intellectual landscape, even as "the new orthodoxy" in both intellectual and popular circles (Williams 2015, 2, 8, 16-17, cf. Stenmark 2001, vii). To understand this contemporary attitude or doctrine, we must first make a distinction between scientism in the broad sense and scientism in the narrow sense. In the broad sense, scientism is a dogmatic overconfidence in science, the methods of science, and scientific knowledge (Williams 2015, 10). Scientism in this sense entails or can lead to the belief that science is *the* source of knowledge regarding all aspects of human life, and that science may even provide the eventual solution to all human problems (2-3). In the narrow sense, by contrast, scientism "is overconfidence in science, defined by, constructed around, and requiring that, the world must be made up of physical matter following particular lawful principles, and that *all* phenomena are essentially thus constituted" (10, emphasis added).

It is fairly easy to see why scientism in the narrow sense, which includes the belief that all things in the universe are made of matter, would be profoundly antithetical to the claims of most believers. For one would be hard pressed to find a believer in a God made of matter. God, as traditionally understood, would thus appear to be ruled out of court. In addition, the advocate of the "naturalist materialist metaphysics" which is implicit in this

form of scientism would tend to consider the many forms of pious experience, however exalted or transformative those experiences might seem, to be reducible to a set of material or chemical processes in the brain. According to Richard Williams, the "tension between reductive naturalistic explanation and the understanding and preservation of our humanity is probably most clearly visible in the interface of science (as scientism understands it) and religion" (8). Scientism, which has come to "invade" our cultural discourse "as, for example, in the popular rhetoric of the so-called new atheists," results in "a fundamental alteration of our understanding of our nature and ourselves" (8). Presenting us with a mechanistic and impersonal world, materialistic scientism "entails acceptance of the proposition that there is no rational order *inherent* in the world itself, that is, as part of its nature and status within a larger meaningful whole" (11). The world as understood by scientism has no *telos* or purpose (11) and no room for meaningful transcendence (12), for according to scientism there is "no need, or, perhaps even no sense, in positing the existence of anything other than matter" (12).

On what basis, or by means of what arguments, do the advocates of scientism—who rarely, it must be said, embrace this label—deny the genuine existence of anything other than matter? On what basis do they deny the possibility of transcendence, the existence of a rational or meaningful whole, and, as this implies, the existence of God? In the view of one such advocate, our knowledge of these things has increased dramatically on account of the discoveries of modern natural science. Unlike people in former times, "we know that the laws governing the physical world (including accidents, disease, and other misfortunes) have no goals that pertain to human well-being. There is no such thing as fate, providence, karma, spells, curses, augury, divine retribution, or answered prayers" (15; here Williams is quoting an article by Stephen Pinker). But what is the foundation for this knowledge?

Williams and other critics of scientism argue that, upon analysis, that foundation is in fact quite fragile. For despite their explicit or implicit reliance on a materialistic metaphysics, the advocates of scientism do not tend to provide any argument, any justification, for that metaphysics. It remains an assumption. Indeed, perhaps no justification *could* be provided, for a metaphysical argument would have to be a philosophical argument and (as such) go beyond the bounds of science, while the advocates of scientism consider only scientific knowledge to be genuine knowledge. As Williams puts it, scientism does not provide an argument for its own metaphysics, "since the validity of the metaphysics itself is not a question that can be answered scientifically" (4, compare Stenmark 2001, 5).

On what basis, then—if not on the basis of a metaphysical or philosophical argument—do the advocates of scientism deny the existence of God or gods? Williams argues, quoting Richard Lewontin, that the atheism of scientism is not a *conclusion* of scientific endeavor, but rather a presupposition or conjecture which is taken as axiomatic from the outset. That atheism is one among a set of "shared metaphysical, epistemological, and moral commitments" assumed to be true before any scientific inquiry begins (15). Yet the advocates of scientism tend to present their atheism as a conclusion of scientific inquiry, rather than as a presupposition or commitment.

But if much of contemporary science has become scientistic, and to that extent dogmatic and unscientific (5, 11, cf. Stenmark 2001, ix), can it be trusted to investigate the phenomenon of piety? In other words, if contemporary scientists who turn to the phenomenon of piety tend to assume from the outset, not only that the pious do not experience actual contact with divine beings, but also that the mental states which lend support to the widespread belief in such contact can be reduced to "operations of the matter of the brain" (Williams 2015, 12), can they be trusted to approach the phenomenon with

evenhanded or scientific objectivity?[8] The commitments or assumptions implicit in the scientistic approach lead, almost inevitably, to a dismissal of the possibility of God's existence and to a dismissal of piety.[9]

But the preceding critique applies only to scientism in the narrow sense. Scientism, in that form, assumes that all phenomena in the universe are material and that God, if He is understood to be immaterial, does not exist. But what of scientism in the broad sense, which avoids such assumptions and can be understood simply as a confidence in the methods of natural science, or in the capacity of natural science to investigate all things?

When contemporary scientists investigate piety, they tend to see it through the lens provided by the theory of natural selection. Evolutionary biologists, in particular, often attempt to explain religion by reference its "high survival value," that is, by reference to the Darwinian fitness of people who believe in gods (Stenmark 2001, 80).[10] Particularly helpful is a belief in gods who persuade people to subordinate their self-interest to the interest of the group to which they belong: "religion, like morality, is a way in which the genes have tricked

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[8] For examples of this approach, see Azari 2001, McNamara 2006, 1-32 and 171-204, and Persinger 2001, 519-20: "The formal study of the brain mechanisms and electromagnetic patterns within the brain that generate the god experience might be considered one of the most important challenges to which neuroscience must respond."

[9] See, for instance, *The 'God' Part of the Brain* by Matthew Alper: "modern neural-imaging technologies, which have allowed us to glimpse into the biological nature of cognition, have revealed that what we perceive as spiritual/mystical/transcendental experiences can be reduced to the workings of our basic neurobiology—this and nothing more. Though we have no evidence whatsoever of the existence of any spiritual reality, there is real, hard evidence to suggest that spiritual experiences are strictly physical in nature" (2008, 154). That spiritual experiences "can" be reduced to the workings of neurobiology is undeniable; but that such a reduction would be accurate, no amount of material evidence can confirm.

[10] In a 2003 poll of 149 prominent evolutionists, 72% agreed with the claim that "religion is a social phenomenon that has developed with the biological evolution of *Homo sapiens*—therefore religion should be considered as a part of our biological heritage, and its tenets should be seen as a labile social adaptation, subject to change and reinterpretation" (Graffin and Provine 2007, 295-6). Only 10% of respondents indicated that they believed that "evolution and religion are mutually exclusive and separated by a gulf that cannot be bridged" (296).

humans to cooperate with others and care about them. While the individual pays, his or her genes and tribe gain. Religion is adaptive" (81-82).[11] To prove that the function of religion is "to protect the genes and secure the fitness of the individual," understood as a member of a group, evolutionary biologists (see, for instance, Wilson 1978) assemble "more and more examples" of religious beliefs and activities that can be explained as fitness-maximizing strategies (81). But as Mikael Stenmark points out, even the admission that religion might increase reproductive fitness does not entail the conclusion that this explains fully its function or origin. Indeed, the explanations provided by evolutionary theory do not in any way exclude theological explanations, which hold that religion is "primarily a response to … what believers experience as a divine presence within or beyond our world" (83, cf. 94).[12] By ignoring those aspects of religion which do not appear to maximize evolutionary fitness (89-90) and by presupposing scientific naturalism and thus begging the question, evolutionary biologists tend to weaken the force of their own explanations (91-92). Without making unjustified assumptions, evolutionary biology, despite its great value in other respects, cannot itself disprove or even cast serious doubt upon the claims that God exists and that believers experience genuine contact with Him. Yet evolutionary biologists, like the advocates of scientism in the narrow sense, tend to assume that natural science can explain fully the phenomenon of piety; that is, they tend to assume that what they are investigating is a natural, rather than a supernatural, phenomenon.[13]

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[11] See for instance Boyer and Bergstrom 2008: "what is remarkable in religion is not just the production of supernatural concepts but also their social and emotional importance, which in a cognitive account also derives from evolved dispositions to morality and social interaction" (119).

[12] Consider also the critique of Darwinian explanations of ethics in Sorell 1991, 161-167.

[13] As examples of this approach, see Wunn 2003, Rowthorn 2011, and Henneberg and Saniotis 2009, as well as Bronkhorst 2001 on the "ascetic instinct."

But it is not only the field of evolutionary biology that is prone to scientism in the broad sense. An overconfidence in the methods of natural science may also extend into other disciplines. Stenmark isolates a particular form of scientism he calls "academic-internal scientism," which is "the attempt to reduce (or translate) into natural science an academic discipline which has not previously been understood as a natural science" (2001, 1). Tom Sorell, discussing the same phenomenon, cites "a demand among English-speaking social theorists for approaches modeled on, or simply appropriated from, natural science," which "began to be heard often in the 1950s and 1960s, primarily in the United States" (1991, 169). In political science, sociology, and anthropology, this approach has been influential. A particularly striking and instructive example of academic-internal scientism in the study of piety, as it seems to me, is provided by Rodney Stark's *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (2001). By turning briefly to Stark's analysis, we can learn what a scientific sociology of religion might look like, and why it—like scientistic approaches that depend on materialistic metaphysics or evolutionary biology—might lead to an incomplete account of piety.

In *Acts of Faith*, Stark develops a "theory of religious economy" in response to his awareness that "religious behavior is the only area in the social sciences where the rational actor axiom has been excluded—and without it, all major theories of economics, sociology, political science, and experimental psychology are nullified" (2001, 55). According to Stark, if we apply the rational actor axiom to religious behavior, understanding that behavior as a form of cost-benefit calculation, then "the full theoretical resources of social science can be utilized to understand religion" (56). Stark portrays the decision to become religious as a comparison of pros and cons on a ledger. Among the advantages of religiosity are "great warmth and family feeling of the group, and a busy, often exciting, life" (46), and especially

"otherworldly rewards," "usually posthumous" (88). The religious life is conceived of as a transaction between men and gods, with "terms of exchange," "prices," and "extended exchange relationships … in which the human makes periodic payments over a substantial length of time, often until death" (88-99). By the end of Stark's analysis—after 20 definitions and 28 propositions—we have arrived at "an adequate micro theory of religion based on rational assumptions" (113).

But this final word, "assumptions," alerts us to a problem. The assumption that human beings are rational creatures—meaning here, creatures who seek to maximize the fulfillment of their preferences, or their perceived utility—is just that: an assumption, or, as Stark admits, an "axiom" (43). By testing "empirical predictions deduced from the propositions," one may test and confirm those propositions or axioms themselves (43). But here, I would argue, Stark betrays his overconfidence in the methods of modern natural science, especially as applied to human psychology. For can an axiom truly be confirmed by an alignment of perceivable facts with the axiom? Doesn't the possibility remain that such an alignment is merely coincidental, or merely one side of the story? It would seem that a different axiom—that humans sometimes *subordinate* or *sacrifice* their own preferences or interests, as advised, required, or compelled by divine beings with whom they are truly in contact—is equally borne out by the observable facts.

Indeed, the axiom that human beings are best understood as simply rational creatures, if 'rational' is taken to mean 'self-interested,' contradicts the claims of most believers. For believers do not tend to understand themselves as simply self-interested utility-maximizers in an economic transaction with God.[14] In fact, the three major monotheisms are in perfect agreement that the sacrifice of one's interest is not only possible

[14] See Plato *Euthphr.* 14e.

but demanded by God.[15] How can one claim to understand religious psychology if one dismisses, by denying from the outset the validity of, what believers say about their own thoughts and motives? It would seem that Stark cannot understand believers as they understand themselves, nor do full justice to religious psychology, if he assumes as axiomatic the conclusion he would need to prove: that piety is a self-interested choice. Rational choice theory, as employed by Stark, implicitly assumes the invalidity or impossibility of what believers routinely claim about themselves, because it assumes that piety is (1) a matter of reason or rational calculation, as opposed to faith, (2) a choice, as opposed to a calling or an infusion of divine grace, and especially (3) self-interested, as opposed to selfless, self-transcendent, or radically self-transformative. By describing the psychology of piety without doing justice to the possibility of human selflessness, Stark's position becomes blindly, even irrationally, "rationalist." Like the scientistic proponent of materialistic metaphysics or evolutionary biology, Stark does not allow his study of the phenomena to guide him to certain conclusions, but rather allows his conclusions to guide and determine his study.

Certainly Plato's lack of awareness of modern science, as such, is no indication of his superiority as a guide for the investigation of piety. But that lack of awareness may insulate

[15] "Rav Yochanan said in the name of Rav Shimon ben Yehotzadak: 'It was decided by a vote in the loft of the house of Nitezeh in Lod: For all the sins in the Torah, if a person is told, 'Transgress and you will not be killed,' they should transgress and not be killed, except for idol worship, sexual relations and bloodshed.' A Jew must sacrifice his or her life rather than transgress the above-mentioned sins" (*Talmud*, Sanhedrin 74a, cf. Maimonides *Yesodei HaTorah* Ch. 5). "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship … For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others … Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. (Romans 12:1-10). "The people who are protected from the avarice of their own selves are successful" (*Quran* 64:16); "You will not attain true goodness until you give of what you love" (*Quran* 3:92).

him from the kinds of scientistic overconfidence—in materialism, atheism, evolutionary biology, and the methods of modern science—that can lead to a biased understanding of piety, or even a dismissal of it. To judge from superficial indications, Plato himself believed in immaterial forms or *ideas* (*Rep.* 508d-509d, *Phd.* 78d-79a), the immortality of the soul (*Rep.* 614a and 621c, *Phd.* 79b-81e, *Laws* 904c-905c), and the traditional gods of the Greeks (*Laws* 745b-e, 759a-e). If those beliefs were unfounded or dogmatic, then Plato's investigation of piety may be biased in a different way—we must remain cautious. But by taking Plato as a guide, if we do so in a thoughtfully critical spirit, we may be insulated from the biases to which we ourselves, as members of a partly scientistic culture, may be prone.

Plato's Openness

The specific problems that are typical of relativistic or scientistic investigations of piety, as discussed above, can in fact be characterized as versions of a broader problem. This is the problem of theoretical imposition. By theoretical imposition, I mean the imposition of certain theoretical assumptions on the phenomena. The relativist theorist, for instance, assumes from the outset that beliefs about the gods, and the moral opinions to which those beliefs may be connected, are merely historical constructions or artifacts, not "true" in the way they are often believed to be true.[16] The scientistic theorist, for his part, assumes from the outset that piety is a wholly natural, even wholly material, phenomenon rather than a

[16] See the chapter "The Contingency of Community" in Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*: "A poeticized culture would be one which would not insist we find the real wall behind the painted ones, the real touchstones of truth as opposed to touchstones which are merely cultural artifacts. It would be a culture which, precisely by appreciating that *all* touchstones are such artifacts, would take as its goal the creation of ever more various and multicolored artifacts" (1989, 53-4). The touchstones that Rorty has in mind include opinions about morality and divinity.

form of access to some transcendent truth about an immaterial being or beings. Each type of theorist imposes a preconceived and comprehensive understanding onto the phenomena.

But imposition of this kind precludes receptivity or openness. When the objects of study include human beings and human experiences, the danger of theoretical imposition may be especially great. As Sorell puts it, discussing academic-internal scientism: "Unlike the objects studied by the natural sciences, people have their own understandings of themselves which may constrain social scientific theories and compromise their pretensions to objectivity" (1991, 169). The danger, more precisely, is "a possible, or even an unavoidable, influence of theory and theorist on the subject matter of theory" (169). And this danger, as it seems to me, is especially acute in the case of investigations of, and theories about, piety. For the pious experience is opaque to the external observer, and there may exist an especially strong motive for the investigator to yield to prejudice or to project his own assumptions onto that experience. And if the pious person claims, explicitly or implicitly, that the investigator is living wrong, that his salvation depends upon his acceptance of some pious experiences as genuine, the motive to debunk may be especially intense.

Plato's approach to the phenomenon of piety is marked by its openness. A full justification of that suggestion will have to await our analysis of his dialogue on piety, the *Euthyphro*. But some initial evidence for it can be provided by the observation that Plato wrote dialogues rather than treatises. In the dialogues, we see the character Socrates encountering various people, Athenians and foreigners, and questioning them as to their opinions. Plato's Socrates does not seem eager to impose any theoretical framework or conclusions on the human phenomena. He does not typically employ abstruse philosophic or scientific terminology, but rather sticks with words and ideas that are understandable to, and employed by, his interlocutors. Quite a few of those interlocutors are pious. In speaking

with Cephalus in the *Republic*, Nicias in the *Laches*, Ion in the *Ion*, and Euthyphro, Socrates seems eager to learn from those who claim, explicitly or implicitly, to have some knowledge of the divine. He elicits responses, listens, and adjusts his tactics of interrogation to match the particular convictions he encounters. This is not to say that Plato's Socrates is pliant. His questions are pointed, carefully chosen, and frequently offensive. But he seems eager to learn from the pious, however that learning may have to occur, rather than to use them as tools in the service of proving a theory.

Plato's Seriousness

Plato's investigation of piety is marked not only by its openness but also by its seriousness. Indeed, the question of piety, along with the question of divinity to which it is linked, may be one focal point of the Platonic dialogues. That suggestion, of course, is open to certain objections. For it is not evident, from an initial reading of the dialogues, that piety or divinity were among Plato's chief concerns.[17] Most of the dialogues appear to focus on the "moral-political" questions. Socrates, as depicted in the dialogues, seems interested above all in defining things like justice, courage, moderation, and virtue. He does not spend most of his time talking about the divine things, but rather investigates the noble, the lawful, the just, and the good. Indeed, Socrates was said to be the first philosopher to call philosophy down from the heavens in order to investigate the human things (Cic. *Tusc.* v.10). How, then, can it be claimed that a *political* philosopher had among his chief concerns the questions of piety and divinity?

[17] See Vlastos 1991: The Platonic Socrates investigates "the concept of god no further than is needed to bring it into line with his ethical views, deriving from his new vision of human goodness norms binding on the gods themselves" (162).

Let us think briefly about Plato's two longest and most obviously political dialogues, the *Republic* and *Laws*. In each dialogue, a more or less ideal city is constructed in speech. But the philosopher in the *Laws*, the "Athenian Stranger," is not merely interested in politics but also, and prominently, in the questions of piety and divinity. With two old, pious men, he spends all day hiking in the hot sun to the cave and temple of Zeus, elaborating, along the way, a lengthy proof of the existence of god which relies, at key points, on what he learns about piety from Kleinias, his primary interlocutor (894d, 895c-d, 896b, 897b, 898c, 899a-c, 900d-903a, 906e-907b). The entire investigation of political things in the *Laws* is infused with a concern for the gods and divine law (e.g. 624a, 632d, 709b, 716c-e, 727a, 741c, 762e, 853d, 888b, 966c). Of course, the *Laws* is not a typical Platonic dialogue, but a late work, different in tone from the others, featuring neither Socrates nor Socratic dialectics in the usual sense. But in the *Republic*, too, we encounter a concern with piety and divinity. For the entire discussion of justice which constitutes the bulk of the *Republic* is instigated, not by Socrates' questioning of young men (as might have been expected: 328a, 328d), but by his questioning of an old, pious man who has implied that he may have special insights with regard to the afterlife (330e). Cephalus, the owner of the house in which the conversation takes place, appears to be the embodiment of traditional piety. At the beginning of the conversation, crowned with a wreath, he has just performed a religious sacrifice (328c), and he leaves the conversation almost immediately because, as he says, it is already time to look after the sacrifices again (331d). It is his hopes and fears about death and the afterlife, and his implicit definition of justice, which set in motion the discussion of justice. But in that case, we are presented with a puzzle. Why does Plato frame the *Republic* in this way? Why is the investigation of justice brought about by the interrogation of an old, traditionally pious man? Is there some connection between the dialectical investigation of the moral-political things

and the investigation of piety?

To answer that question, we must turn to Socrates' explicit account of the aim of dialectics, which he provides in the *Apology of Socrates*. Unfortunately, on turning to that dialogue, we discover that Socrates provides not one but rather two accounts of the aim of dialectics, and that these accounts may contradict each other. In the first account, Socrates says that he turned to the activity of dialectical refutations grudgingly, in order to test or refute the divination of the Delphic Oracle, a priestess of Apollo, who had told Socrates' associate Chaerephon that no one was wiser than Socrates (20e-22e). By publically refuting the claims to knowledge made by the politicians, the poets, and the manual artisans—all of whom claimed, in some way, to be wise—Socrates sought and investigated as a form of devotion to the god, or "in relation to the god" (23b), considering it "necessary to regard the matter of the god as most important" (21e).[18] He thereby confirmed that his knowledge of his own ignorance was profitable to him, or was preferable to a belief that he knew things he did not know (22e).[19] In the second account, Socrates compares himself to a gadfly sent by the god. Here, the aim of dialectics is to awaken, persuade, and reproach the citizens to care for virtue, which they, like Socrates, seem to know something about (30d-31b). Rather than refuting others publically, and proving that they, like him, do not know of anything noble and good (21d), Socrates in this portrait exhorts others privately to care for virtue, as a father or an older brother might do (31b).

Most scholars, understandably, focus their attention on the second portrait of dialectics. This portrait is easy to understand. The aim of dialectics is didactic. The

[18] See Stokes 1997, 119: "in relation to the god: The relevant preposition *kata* can mean 'according to'; but the sense is best left vague here, 'in relation to.' "
[19] For an outline of the principle arguments against the plausibility of the Delphic Oracle story, see Stokes 1997, 115-116. On the question of Socrates' own piety, see the disagreement between West 1979, 106-126 and Reeve 1989, 22-28.

philosopher, sent by god, exhorts his fellow citizens to care for virtue above all else. He serves as the moral conscience for his community; his goals are moral and civic. But what of the first, more enigmatic account of the aim of dialectics?[20] In that account, Socrates hardly seems to exhort others to virtue. Indeed, if virtue is among the things that are noble and good, he implies that he does not even know what virtue is (21d, Leibowitz 2010, 3-4, 64, 76)![21] Rather, he refutes people in public, "perceiving with pain and fear" that he is becoming

[20] In general, scholars tend to overemphasize the civic and didactic goal of dialectics, and to underestimate the extent to which dialectics might serve as a means of education for the dialectician himself. Seeskin writes that the purpose of dialectics is to facilitate discovery in the interlocutor (1987, 3, 13) and presents Socrates as a moral reformer (135). Scott is dubious that Socrates intends to learn anything through his conversations, and understands him as primarily a teacher (2000, 2, 40-49). Tarrant understands the purpose of elenchtic argumentation to be "the recognition of those we may trust on any particular issue" (2002, 73); through his refutations, Socrates can indicate, to others, those whose leadership might ultimately help them to distinguish between truth and falsehood (74). Robinson, in his effort to pinpoint the aim of dialectics, settles on philanthropy, education and the inculcation of virtue (in Vlastos 1980, 82-90); but his account depends on a blurring of the Delphic oracle story with the gadfly story (see 75-85). See also Brickhouse and Smith 1996, 145-157 for a good summary and critique of the debate over the purpose and character of elenchtic argumentation.

[21] In *Socratic Citizenship* (2001), Dana Villa seems to promise an account of dialectics which differs from the usual account (that the aim of dialectics is simply "to make men moral": xii) and which takes into account Socrates' professions of ignorance about virtue. According to Villa, it is Socrates' "negative wisdom," especially his awareness of his *lack* of moral expertise, which "serves as the basis and goad of Socrates' philosophical activity" (18). But Villa makes little mention of what also spurred that activity, namely the god, the matter of the god, or the revelation delivered by the god's oracle. Villa presents us with a Socrates who is less concerned with divinity and more concerned with a kind of skeptical yet public-spirited citizenship which does, in the end, make men moral, or at least more moral, by imparting to them some of the estrangement (15), disillusionment (19, 58), and "rigorous moral and intellectual integrity" (xii, compare 20-21) that Socrates himself embodied, and by thus enabling them to make moral progress in avoiding the injustices to which social and political beings are prone (24-29, cf. 20-21). Socrates' intellectual integrity, according to Villa, consists partly in a skepticism which is "animated by the awareness that by presenting themselves as either the whole moral truth or as the moral fact of the matter, all 'final' answers immediately become falsehoods" (21). But what is the basis for this "awareness," or for the imputation of it to Socrates? Would not a real skeptic be skeptical of even that awareness, and admit for that reason the possibility of final moral (or religious) truth? If Socrates were a skeptic in that fuller sense, then his own description of his public refutations as a way of taking most seriously "the matter of the god" might have to be considered in a more serious light. On the whole, Villa, by presenting us with an individualistic, egalitarian,

hated (21e). But what is the motive for dialectics of this sort? What can it mean to say that by investigating and refuting people's claims to knowledge about what is noble and good (21d) or about the greatest things (22d), Socrates is devoting himself to the god or considering the matter of the god as the most important thing?

According to David Leibowitz's insightful commentary on the *Apology*, the aim of Socratic dialectics is most fully—though subtly—revealed, not in the account of Socrates as a gadfly, but in the Delphic Oracle story. Carefully read, that story implies that the aim of dialectics is to refute claims of divine experience in order to confirm the superiority of the philosophic life (2010, 68-9). To accomplish this, Socrates makes people aware of their misunderstandings about the noble or the just, that is, aware of the confusions implicit in their opinions about morality, and thereby shakes or even dissolves their confidence that they have experienced contact with divinity (88, 94, 100). These are the refutations to which Socrates refers. By witnessing this shaking or dissolving of confidence, Socrates can increase his own "suspicion or confidence" (96) or confirm his opinion (88, 93, 98, cf. 73) that divine experience derives from (72), rests on (88, 96), or arises from (93) faulty beliefs about morality, rather than arising from god or gods. In this way, Socrates could "make progress toward settling the question of the gods," could trace "the error of those who bring forth 'evidence' of their existence to something natural," such as certain longings or confusions (87, cf. 71). In other words, he "sought to settle" the question of the gods through political philosophy, understanding his conversations about virtue as "the key to answering the question of whether or not there are gods, and hence whether or not philosophy in the full sense is possible" (71). The goal of dialectics, then, is to confirm that the origin of pious experience, at least in its most compelling form, is natural or human rather than divine. In

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and somewhat postmodernist or existentialist Socrates (see 15, 21, 29), does not do justice to the role of the gods in his quest.

this way, Plato and his Socrates, even when they appear to focus most single-mindedly on the moral-political questions (questions about justice, nobility, and virtue), are in fact investigating the questions of piety and divinity with the utmost seriousness.

Leibowitz's reading of the *Apology* is extraordinarily careful, and his account of the aim of dialectics is to a great extent compelling. But that account also has a few problems or ambiguities.

First, there is the question of precisely what Socrates was able to accomplish through dialectics. Was he able to answer the question of whether or not there are gods? Or, was he merely able to confirm his theory that the experience of divinity rests on moral confusions, as its condition or cause? Or, even more modestly, was he merely able to increase his confidence, or his suspicion, that such a theory was true? Or, more modestly still, was he merely able to confirm that in the case of a particular interlocutor, there was a correlation between faulty moral opinions and the experience of divinity? Of course, the discovery of such a correlation would not prove that the faulty moral opinions were a condition or a cause of the experience of divinity, even in the case of that particular believer, much less in the case of other believers. For even if one were to observe repeatedly a correlation between two things, one could not attain knowledge of conditions or causes, but only a reasonable confidence or true opinion about them (see 66-67 fn. 31, Lutz 1998, 125, al-Ghazali 2002, 166-177). At times, Leibowitz says that Socrates is only reasonably confident (81, 88, 94, 96, 98, 100) that the divine experience arises from natural causes. But at other times, he seems to say that Socrates can confirm (88, 93, 98, see also 70, 73, and 86-7) the existence of a conditional or causal relationship between something natural, such as moral opinions, and pious experience. And at other times, going still further, he seems to imply that dialectics, in Socrates' view, could allow him to answer or settle the question of the gods' existence (71).

It is possible that his initial statement about Socrates' goal for dialectics (71) is provisional, or is meant only to articulate an early hope that later came to seem unreasonable to Socrates, and that subsequent references to "confirmation" are not meant to imply that Socrates attained knowledge in the strict sense. But this would need to be clarified, in order to pinpoint exactly what could, and could not, be learned through dialectics.

Second, apart from the question of *what* dialectics can accomplish, or the question of its function, there is the question of the manner in which it serves that function. If dialectics allows Socrates to confirm a theory, how does it do so? What kind of confirmation is Socrates looking for? One confirmation that Leibowitz mentions is anger. By making others feel anger and even hatred, Socrates can confirm that they are "dissatisfied with themselves, aware of a serious defect in their lives" (79) and that the philosophic life, which takes its bearings not from revelation or intuition, but from reason, is superior to theirs (80-81). But anger is a highly ambiguous confirmation (Bolotin 2011, 88-89). Perhaps those who were refuted merely got angry that Socrates was offensive, clever, pedantic, preening, or high-handed (a possibility mentioned by Leibowitz himself: 2010, 85). Perhaps their anger did not indicate any sweeping self-condemnation or self-doubt. Moreover, if Socrates seeks to confirm the presence of faulty moral opinions in the minds of those who claim to have experienced contact with divinity, precisely what type of moral opinions are at issue, and why are they always faulty (96)? Leibowitz describes a confusion about motivation at the core of moral experience (96-97) and the inconceivability of 'highness' (96-97). But his account of the aim of dialectics would be more persuasive if it included a fuller examination of the precise and manifold character of moral opinions.

Third, and most importantly, there is the question of the limitedness of Leibowitz's study. The problems I have described above are in large part due to the fact that Leibowitz is

writing a commentary on a single dialogue which may not provide direct evidence for all of the points he wants to make. He is analyzing the *Apology*, in which no serious dialectical refutations of the kind he describes take place. A close reading of the *Apology* cannot be expected to accomplish the task of fleshing out precisely the goal, and the means, of Socratic dialectics as a whole. To make progress in that task, we need to see dialectics in action. By analyzing closely a particular case of dialectics, we may be able to make progress in understanding what it can discover about piety and piety's connection, or lack thereof, to moral opinions.

The Euthyphro

If we seek to understand the nature of piety and its connection to moral opinions, as well as the way in which Socratic dialectics, as adumbrated in the *Apology*, might shed light on that topic, the dialogue which seems most promising as a focal point is Plato's *Euthyphro*. There are several reasons to turn to the *Euthyphro*.

First, the *Euthyphro* is connected with the *Apology*, by its dramatic situation and by its frequent references to the case against Socrates. At the opening of the *Euthyphro*, Socrates has come to meet his indictment by Meletus on a charge of impiety and corruption of the young. Not only does Socrates describe the case against himself, he describes at length his accuser, Meletus, who appears as a character in the *Apology*. If we want a fuller portrait of the dialectical refutations that are obliquely described in the *Apology*, these connections between the two dialogues may indicate that the *Euthyphro* is a good place to look. More importantly, the *Euthyphro* presents the interrogation and refutation of a would-be prophet, who, in the course of that refutation, becomes angry at Socrates, whom he initially admired. At the end

of the dialogue, angry and confused, Euthyphro hurries away on "other business." If we accept the suggestion of Leibowitz (2010, 74, cf. 87-88), prophets were among those whom Socrates examined dialectically, refuting their claims to be wise. Perhaps, then, an analysis of the *Euthyphro* can help us to flesh out the skeletal portrait of dialectics—as a way of considering the question of the god to be most important—which is provided in the *Apology*.[22]

Second, the subject of the *Euthyphro* is piety. It is the only Platonic dialogue devoted solely and explicitly to that theme. Socrates attempts, with the help of Euthyphro, to answer the question, "What is the pious (*hosion*)?" That question may be roughly rephrased as, "What does divinity allocate to or demand of human beings?"[23] The subject of the *Euthyphro*, then, is not merely theoretical but immediately practical. As Socrates remarks in his final words of the dialogue, his primary motive in seeking to learn the pious from Euthyphro was his hope that, having learned it, he might "live better for the rest of [his] life" (16a3-4).[24] Knowledge of the pious, then, will be knowledge of how to live. The question of how to live, in turn, is never far removed from the question of morality. Running through the *Euthyphro* as a whole is the question—sometimes more explicit, sometimes less—of what the

[22] Here I agree with Ranasinghe, that the *Euthyphro* "offers the best way to gain access to Plato's *Apology of Socrates*" (2012, 1), by revealing what was at stake in the trial and what Socrates' characteristic manner of inquiry aimed to discover.

[23] See Pangle 1980, p. 518, Lewis 1985, 226, Versenyi 1982, 1-3.

[24] I use the translation by West and West (1984), with minor alterations. I will return several times to the important question of Socrates' motive in speaking with Euthyphro. As an initial indication of the puzzle, consider the interpretation of Burnet, who explains the choice of dialectics as a mode of inquiry by reference to an analogy with geometry: the attempt to settle questions of right and wrong in a mode as effective as the arts of measurement employed by geometricians would require Socrates to insist on "express admission of every step in the argument just as Euclid does. It is for this reason, too, that his 'dialectic' can only be adequately reproduced in the form of a dialogue" (1954, 45). But this explanation leaves unclear why an actual interlocutor is needed at all. If Socrates could, on his own, be as certain of the steps and conclusions of his argument as Euclid was certain of the steps and conclusions of his proofs, why would he consider it necessary to make those arguments in conversation with interlocutors, who were, as is likely, less wise than he was?

relationship is between piety and moral opinions. Indeed, we turn to the *Euthyphro* primarily because it is Plato's most explicit and direct investigation of that relationship.

Other dialogues, of course, are also relevant to that investigation—for instance, the *Republic*, the *Laws*, the *Ion*, and the *Laches*. But the *Republic* and *Laws* have other goals, especially the goal of constructing a city in speech. In the *Laws*, moreover, Socrates is not present, and we cannot be certain that it contains a genuine example of Socratic dialectics.[25] Cephalus, the most seriously pious character in the *Republic*, leaves the conversation almost before it begins. In the *Ion*, the topic is not precisely the relationship between piety and moral opinions, but rather the means of determining the character of divine inspirations through poetry. And in the *Laches*, despite the presence of pious interlocutors, the main goal is to define the virtue of courage.

Only the *Euthyphro* has the definition of the pious as its primary goal, and the relationship between piety and moral opinions as its direct and constant theme. We turn to the *Euthyphro*, then, in the hopes of understanding more fully the nature of piety and its connection with moral opinions, along with the manner in which dialectics might shed light on that topic.

[25] As Versenyi puts it: "If by dialectic we mean the Socratic method of conversation which, through skillful questioning, elicits from the learner the truths to be arrived at and leaves him no peace until he can give reasons for what he believes to be true, there is obviously no question of dialectic or anything resembling maieutic questioning here [in Plato's *Laws*]" (1961, 74).

Chapter Two:
Euthyphro's Character

Setting up the Euthyphro

In locating the *Euthyphro* within the context of Plato's writings, we may be tempted to categorize it among the "virtue dialogues." Thus it would take its place among the *Laches* (on courage), the *Theages* (on wisdom), the *Charmides* (on moderation), and the *Republic* (on justice). But of course we cannot make a determination as to whether the *Euthyphro* is a virtue dialogue before we determine whether its subject, piety, is a virtue. And the *Republic*, in its apparently exhaustive list of the cardinal virtues, names only four of them: it does not include piety.[26] Did Plato, or Plato's Socrates, consider piety to be a virtue?[27] We cannot attempt to answer this question until we have undertaken a close analysis of the *Euthyphro* itself.

Perhaps we are on safer ground in locating the dialogue within the context of Plato's writings by its dramatic date. The *Euthyphro* would thus take its place among the other

[26] Socrates in the *Protagoras*, by contrast, classifies piety among the virtues, and yet he equates or nearly equates it with justice (331b).
[27] In raising this question I follow Strauss 1996, 5, 9-10, Versenyi 1982, v, and Lewis 1985, 225.

dialogues concerned with the last few weeks of Socrates' life, dialogues concerned with the events surrounding his trial and execution by the city of Athens. These dialogues include the *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*. The connection between the subject matter of the *Euthyphro* (the pious) and Socrates' trial and execution on a capital charge (for impiety and corruption of the young) would seem to be clear enough. And yet we are still entitled to wonder: why would Plato choose to present *the* Platonic dialogue on piety in the context of the philosopher's trial and execution by the city?[28] Given the shadow cast over the dialogue by the death of Socrates, we must keep in mind, as we read, the question of the relationship or tension between the philosopher and the city, between the life of the mind and the life of political activity.

Before turning to our analysis, a brief word is in order about the physical setting of the *Euthyphro*. As we learn from the opening lines of the dialogue, Euthyphro greets and converses with Socrates at the Porch of the King.[29] Socrates has arrived there to meet the indictment of Meletus. The official nearby, the King Archon, though elected democratically (by lot), obtained through his election ancestral authority over the most sacred things and the most ancient sacrifices. The philosopher and the prophet thus converse at the very intersection of political and religious authority. Their conversation takes place surrounded by the laws of the city, as physically inscribed on stone tablets called *stele*.[30] Thus we may expect

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[28] As Marlo Lewis points out, not only the *Euthyphro* but also the *Apology* treats the theme of piety "within the context of Socrates' mortal struggle with his native city" (1985, 228).

[29] The king or king archon was a civic-religious official who was elected by lot and who had preliminary jurisdiction over murder and impiety cases. See Saxonhouse 1988, 285-6, West 1984, 41 fn. 4, and Fustel de Coulanges 1980, 231.

[30] See Saxonhouse 1988, 286. The King Archon was considered "the spokesman of the Law" (Lewis 1985, 234). For a convincing account of the importance of the setting of the *Euthyphro*, see Klonoski, who describes well the "threefold contrast" (1985, 132-134, cf. Neumann 1966, 265) that is implied between Socrates' unconventional piety, Euthyphro's unconventional piety, and the conventional piety represented by the King Archon and the Law. Somewhat less convincing is Klonoski's subsequent account of Plato's intention to

the dialogue and its primary question—What is the pious?—to be somehow connected with the question of law or lawfulness.[31] With these questions and connections in mind, we turn to the dialogue.

Socrates' Case (2a1-3b4)

The dialogue opens with an expression of surprise on the part of Euthyphro. What is new, that Socrates has left his accustomed haunts and now spends his time at the Porch of the King?

In his responses to Euthyphro's questions, Socrates is reticent. Indeed, he is aloof and nearly rude (2a5-6, 2b3, 2b5). By contrast, Euthyphro is eager and curious. He is eager to tell Socrates about his own legal case, the case he is bringing against his father (see 2a3-4 in the light of 3c4-5 and 3e6-7), and he is curious to hear about the case being brought

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represent, in the character of Euthyphro, the coming "regression to the primitive" in the popular religion of Athens. I would suggest that the unorthodox Euthyphro, rather than representing "the true source of impiety gestating in [Athens]" (136), is selected by Plato as the interlocutor in his dialogue on piety in part to draw attention away from the dialogue's implications for conventional piety. Those who are conventionally pious, in other words, may feel them insulated from a critique aimed primarily at the notions a wild nonconformist.

[31] See Allen, who defines *to hosion* (the pious) as what is "sanctioned by divine law" (1970, 25). According to Allen, the dialogue proceeds on the basis of assumptions by Socrates (9), including the assumption that there is "a Form of holiness, and that this Form is a universal, the same in all holy things … and that it is capable of real or essential definition" (68, cf. 45, compare Blits 1980, 19). Understood in this way, the dialectics in which Socrates engages might indeed seem to be an activity done for its own sake rather than as a means to "some propositional product" (9). See also 81: "The dialectical procedure of the *Euthyphro* cannot be represented as an attempt to discover what the word 'holy' means, coupled with a further attempt to find out whether it applies to anything. For … Socrates and Euthyphro assume that there are holy things, and ask only what their nature is" (81). My analysis will imply that Socrates' knowledge of ignorance precluded such assumptions, except when made in a provisional spirit.

against Socrates, when he learns of it.[32] Socrates explains to him, in the order he is asked, first the identity of the indicter (2b7-11) and then the substance of the indictment (2c2-3b4). The substance of the indictment is explained in two parts: Socrates speaks readily and at length about the charge of corrupting the young (2c2-3a5). When he is asked what he is said to do to corrupt the young, he speaks more briefly, and with some skepticism, about the charge of impiety (3b1-4).

Meletus as the Ideal Statesman

By far the strangest, and therefore the most striking, feature of Socrates' description of the indictment is that it consists largely in an extravagant praise of Meletus, the young man by whom Socrates is being indicted. Socrates calls him "wise," indeed the only one of the statesmen "to begin correctly." Now, it is clear that this praise is in some way ironic. That it is ironic becomes especially clear when it is read in the light of Socrates' initial remarks about Meletus' obscurity and ugliness (2b7-11). And yet the irony of ascribing the praise to Meletus, whom Socrates admits he does not know (2b7-8), does not necessarily undermine the sincerity of the substance of the praise, taken by itself. In other words, the qualities ironically ascribed to Meletus may indeed be the qualities that an ideal statesman, according to the Socratic understanding of statesmanship, would necessarily possess. It is

[32] I agree with Ademollo that it is "very reasonable" to identify this Euthyphro with the Euthyphro referred to in the *Cratylus*, to whom Socrates attributes his own religious inspiration (2011, 242), and also that the attribution of that inspiration to Euthyphro is not literally meant (243). But I disagree with the claim that it is unreasonable to identify the conversation referred to in the *Cratylus* with the conversation presented in the *Euthyphro*. After all, if the attribution of the religious inspiration is not literally meant, might the identification of the conversation which led to the inspiration be meant both jokingly or metaphorically, but in some way also seriously? For more on Euthyphro's role in the *Cratylus*, see Ewegen 2014, 125-126. See also Barney 2001, 57: "There is no reason to doubt that this is the Euthyphro of the *Euthyphro*, there portrayed as a dangerous nutbar."

rare, in Plato, to find a description of an ideal statesman in action. Rarer still is a description of an ideal statesman, as it were, "from the inside"—for the praise of Meletus is, for the most part, a description of Meletus' own attitude toward the activity of rule. For these reasons—though it is strange and apparently digressive to begin a dialogue on piety with a depiction of an ideal statesman—we ought to pay careful attention to what Socrates says here.

It is first of all clear that in one crucial respect the attitude of Meletus deviates radically, according to Socrates' description of it here, from the attitude of the average statesman or citizen: Meletus deviates radically in his attitude toward vice. Being "someone wise," Meletus has "discerned [Socrates'] ignorance (*amathian*)" as a corruptor of the young (2c5-7, compare the similar language at 5a7-8 and 16a16a2, as well as *Ap.* 25a12-26a8). In other words, Meletus, as the ideal statesman, views vice as ignorance. Accordingly, he sees punishment not as a noble end in itself, but as a necessary means to virtue or the good. He "punishes" prudently, rather than in a spirit of indignation or revenge. Seeing his own activity of statesmanship as a kind of farming, he weeds out the corrupter, Socrates, not for the sake of harming him, but for the sake of benefiting "the young sprouts" whom Socrates might, in his ignorance, harm.[33] In a spirit of calm and unsentimental beneficence, the ideal statesman cares for the virtue of the citizens, and in the first place he cares for the virtue of the young.[34]

Yet the self-understanding of Meletus, according to the account given by Socrates, is more complicated than the image of the 'statesman-as-farmer' would suggest. For Socrates

[33] It is Euthyphro who makes the first reference to injustice in the dialogue (3a8); Socrates and the Meletus whom he describes or invents speak only of ignorance and corruption.
[34] One may compare this passage with the description of "the great man in the city, the man who is to be proclaimed perfect and the bearer of victory in virtue" at *Laws* 730d, read in the light of 731b-d.

does not restrict himself to this single metaphor. In fact, his metaphors shift, and this shifting may indicate a shifting in the mindset of Meletus. To be more precise, we may analyze that mindset in two parts: Meletus' view of the citizens, and Meletus' view of the city.

The first metaphor that Socrates employs in describing Meletus is not, in fact, an image of the statesman as a benevolent farmer. It is rather an image of Meletus as a child who goes before the city "as if before his mother" in order to accuse Socrates (2c7-8). According to this image, the citizens would seem to be equal, since they are all equally subordinate to the city, their mother. Meletus and his fellow citizens, then, are all children of the city. But in the image that follows, there is a great shift. In that image, according to which Meletus is a statesman-farmer, the other citizens appear to be drastically inferior to him: they are as inferior to him as crops are to men. He tends to their virtue from a superhuman height, weeding out corrupters as necessary. There is no indication that these two images are meant to be understood as referring to two different activities in sequence; that is, they seem to be depictions of precisely the same activity. It seems to be unclear, then, whether Meletus, the ideal statesman, views his fellow citizens as equal to him or as drastically subordinate.

Meletus' view of the city undergoes an even greater shift. In the first metaphor, as mentioned above, the city is a mother to her children, the citizens. She appears to be personified, benevolent, transcendent, far superior to the citizens. But when Meletus is described not in the role of a child but in the role of a statesman-farmer, the city (as a transcendent being) appears to have dropped out entirely. In other words, when Meletus is or thinks of himself as supreme, the city appears to become nothing more than a collection of citizens; the city, understood as such a collection, seems to be far beneath him. And yet,

as if this role, despite its supremacy and freedom, is somehow dissatisfying or undirected, the city *returns*—again, as an apparently transcendent being, but now as one of a different sort. It is no longer a maternal benefactress, protecting or otherwise serving the interests of the citizens, but rather a being that is *served*. Socrates makes it clear that the city is, at this point, in no way equivalent to a collection of citizens: it is only *after* Meletus cares for the virtue of the citizens that he "*will become* (*genēsetai*) the cause of the most and greatest good things for the city" (3a2-5). Meletus' virtue (and presumably the virtue of the other citizens as well), which had moments before seemed to be an end in itself, is now directed toward something else: the good of the city. His inculcation or tendance of virtue was, it turns out, only a prelude or a means to his real task: serving the city, understood (again) as a transcendent being.

To summarize the two preceding paragraphs, we may say that Meletus' view of rule, despite its initial impression of clarity, involves at least three crucial ambiguities. Meletus seems to be uncertain (1) as to whether he is equal to the other citizens, or instead far superior to them; (2) as to whether the city is an exalted being that transcends or even rules humanity, or instead a mere collection of human beings;[35] and (3) as to whether the city, if it is in fact an exalted or even a divine being, primarily serves the good of human beings, or instead is primarily served *by* them. Connected with this third uncertainty, we might also wonder—if the city serves us, rather than we it—whether we can still in that case conceive of it as entirely above us, as entirely exalted. It may be useful to label this collection of

[35] This uncertainty was perhaps foreshadowed by an ambiguity in the tense and meaning of the word *archesthai* at 2d1: "And [Meletus] alone of the statesmen appears to me to begin correctly/to be ruled correctly." (See also *archēs archsamenoi* at 3a5.) On the idea that the city is simply a collection of human beings, see Xenophon, *Mem.* III.7. That idea was perhaps already implicit in Socrates' quiet questioning of the Athenian distinction between public and private lawsuits at 2a5-6: "The Athenians do not call (*kalousin*) it a lawsuit (*dikē*), but an indictment (*graphē*)."

uncertainties, for the time being, 'the relational problem of rule.'[36] If Meletus is, as we may hypothesize him to be, dissatisfied with resolving any one of these three uncertainties, in either direction—that is, with settling on either the first piece of any of the three pairs, in isolation from the second part, or with settling on the second piece, in isolation from the first—he will necessarily remain uncertain as to the character of his own activity of rule. And yet behind each of these uncertainties, perhaps, lies a deeper and in a way simpler confusion as to whether the statesman's virtue, or civic virtue more generally, is good or bad for the one who possesses it.

The preceding analysis, however, would appear to be self-contradictory. For we had earlier claimed, based on what Socrates had said about Meletus' wisdom and his uniquely correct approach to statesmanship, that Meletus was meant to stand in for the ideal statesman. But in light of the tensions that we have found to be implicit in his attitude toward rule, we may be forced to qualify that claim. It remains possible, however, that Socrates means to indicate that even the ideal statesman would be likely to suffer from uncertainties such as the ones we have outlined.

The Initial Socratic Thesis

After the rather lengthy description of the corruption charge and of correct statesmanship, Euthyphro responds by asking Socrates to explain what Meletus accuses him of doing to corrupt the young. Socrates replies to him as follows: "Strange things (*atopa*), you wondrous man, at least on first hearing. For he asserts that I am a maker of gods, and (that)—as one who, making novel gods, does not believe in the ancients ones—he has

[36] Consider in this light the attitude or attitudes of Nicomachides in *Mem.* III.4.

indicted me for their sake (*touton heneka*), as he asserts" (3b1-4). Socrates says nothing more about the impiety charge, and Euthyphro, without entirely meaning to, changes the subject.

Indeed, the accusation of god-making is strange. For in what, precisely, does such an activity consist? If it is a genuine activity, an activity of which Socrates is in fact capable, then manmade creations rise to the level of gods or, as this implies, the gods are in the decisive sense equivalent to manmade creations. But in that case, impiety could hardly be a crime, the activity of god-making could hardly be punishable, and Meletus' accusation would seem to be self-contradictory (compare Plato *Ap.* 26e3-28a2).[37] Surely Meletus does not believe, then, that god-making is a genuine activity, or that gods become real simply through human imagination or human belief.[38]

We are on safer ground in assuming that Meletus believes god-making in the strict sense to be impossible for human beings, that is, to be a preposterous non-activity. It is an activity that takes place only in the mind of Socrates. But if god-making is a preposterous non-activity, why is it punishable? God-making, or the attempt at god-making, might still be punishable: (1) if it is an affront to the genuine gods,[39] or (2) if it harms other human beings by leading them away from a proper belief in the genuine gods. In Socrates' portrait of him, Meletus seems to imply that his primary concern is for the first of these two possibilities. For his accusation of god-making occurs in conjunction with a claim that Socrates does not believe in the ancient gods as well as a claim that he himself has brought the indictment "for

[37] See Lewis 1985, 240 and Blits 1980, 20: "if the gods can be made by men, i.e., by poets, then it might be no less absurd to believe in them, to regard them as divine."
[38] On the other hand, Meletus' opinion that impiety deserves punishment, rather than pity and education, may in itself imply some wavering of his confidence as to the goodness of piety and the existence of the gods.
[39] See Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* I.36 on idolatry, ignorance, and divine wrath.

the sake of those very gods."[40] And yet Socrates seems to be skeptical of this claim: he says that Meletus indicts him for the sake of the ancient gods, "as he asserts" (*hos phēsin*: 3b4). Socrates, we may infer, is more inclined to ascribe to Meletus the second concern; he seems doubtful that Meletus' primary concern is for the gods rather than for human beings.

This doubt was, in a way, already implicit in Socrates' moving the corruption charge to the forefront and making the impiety charge a mere subset of it, a mere afterthought.[41] Indeed, it seems that Socrates would not have even mentioned the impiety charge if Euthyphro had not happened to inquire further. And if we compare—with these observations in mind—the account of the corruption charge with the account of the impiety charge, a kind of Socratic thesis comes to light. For Socrates had presented (with approval) the corruption charge, according to which Meletus was concerned for human beings and for their virtue, or for the common good of those human beings, without ever mentioning piety or the gods. But when he presented the impiety charge, according to which Meletus indicted Socrates for the sake of the gods or on account of Socrates' impiety as such, Socrates expressed some doubt as to Meletus' expressed motive. It seems that, in Socrates' estimation, a concern for justice—especially a concern for serving the common good—can stand alone without any reference to piety or the gods. And yet he is dubious when presented with a pious concern—a concern for the gods as such—in supposed isolation from a concern for justice. All the more strikingly, he seems to doubt the possibility of such

[40] There is an ambiguity in the Greek here. The phrase *touton auton heneka* (3b3-4) could also be translated as "on account of these very things." See West (1984, 42) versus Bruell (1999, 119). But either translation would imply that Meletus has, from his own point of view, brought the indictment out of a concern for Socrates' impiety as such, not merely out of a concern for that impiety insofar as it happens to harm other human beings.

[41] See Blits 1980, 20: "Thus, while Meletus reduces the corruption charge to impiety, Socrates limits his praise to what affects the human or political things."

a concern even in a man he has never met and knows almost nothing about (2b7-8).[42] All of this amounts to a Socratic thesis, however tacit and provisional, that in human beings the concern for justice has some kind of priority to concerns about the gods.[43]

The Pious Man and the Philosopher (3b5-3e7)

After the description, by Socrates, of the two parts of the indictment against him, the dialogue gradually transitions toward the topic of Euthyphro's case. During this transition, however, both Euthyphro and Socrates are the subject of the conversation. The two men can be the subject of conversation simultaneously in part because of two assumptions on the part of Euthyphro. First, he has assumed that the impiety charge is the result of Socrates' having recourse to his *daimonion*—the supernatural voice that spoke to Socrates, advising him as to what he should do or (especially) forego.[44] Second, he has assumed that the *daimonon* is akin to his own power of prophecy. It is on the basis of these two assumptions that he begins to speak of the prophecies that he pronounces before the assembly and to describe the assembly's response to those prophecies (3b5-c5). Socrates, in reply, quietly differentiates himself from Euthyphro by explaining the Athenians' (angry) reaction to teachers of a certain kind (3c6-d2). Finally, in response to Euthyphro's expression of caution or timidity at

[42] Seen in this light, and given a certain ambiguity in the Greek (brought out by Bruell 1999, 119, and by the parenthetical 'that' in the quotation at the beginning of this section), the cause of the 'strangeness' to which Socrates refers at 3b1 may be not only Socrates' activity of god-making but also Meletus' expressed motive for the indictment.

[43] To this one might object that, if political concerns have a certain primacy for Meletus, this is merely because he is primarily a political man (2c8-d1). But the assumption that Meletus is primarily a political man, rather than primarily a pious man, was made by Socrates.

[44] I will return to the mystery of the daimonion. As Joyal (2005) puts it, the daimonion is "an element of the Socratic problem because this phenomenon has proved so difficult to square with the Socrates who commits himself to rational argument and examination in his attempt to develop and defend his idea of the good life" (98).

the prospect of the city's anger (3d3-4), Socrates explains the cause of the difference in the Athenians' reactions to Euthyphro and to himself (3d5-e4).

Euthyphro's Admiration (and Conflation)

It becomes evident in this section of the dialogue that Euthyphro thinks very highly of Socrates. His admiration was perhaps already implicit in his asking, on learning of the case against Socrates, about the identity of the indicter prior to asking about the substance of the indictment (2a6 and 2b11-c1).[45] To ask first about the identity of the indicter is to imply that one has absolute confidence in the injustice and groundlessness of the indictment, and that the main question at issue is the identity (and base motives) of the indicter. But what was an implicit admiration becomes, now, explicit: it seems to Euthyphro that Meletus is "doing evil to the city, beginning from the hearth, by attempting to do injustice to you" (3a7-8).

Euthyphro compares Socrates to the sacred hearth of the city. This is an extraordinary compliment. For the Greeks, the private hearth was the home of the sacred fire, which was the center of piety within the family and the locus of paternal authority.[46] The King archon, before whom Euthyphro has come to present his case, was traditionally understood to be the high priest of the public hearth, which was the most sacred object in the city.[47] By calling an attack on Socrates an attack on the hearth of the city, Euthyphro either replaces the King archon with Socrates, who becomes the new high priest or even the

[45] Saxonhouse (1988, 291) notes this ordering and ascribes it to Euthyphro's love of gossip.
[46] Fustel de Coulanges 1980, 29-41.
[47] Ibid. 231 and Lewis 1985, 238.

father of the city, or, more literally, calls Socrates a sacred being responsible for the very cohesion of the city itself.[48]

But why? That is, why does Euthyphro admire Socrates so highly? It becomes clear, in what Euthyphro goes on to say, that his admiration is partly or even chiefly the result of a certain conflation on his part: he sees himself and Socrates as two peas in a pod.[49] Both are embattled deviants, transpolitical prophets with a direct line to the gods (3b5-c5). Their special capacities and their special status are misunderstood by the many (3b8-9), who mock and persecute them although or because they "envy us all who are of this sort" (3c3-4). Euthyphro sees the pious life and the philosophic life as equivalent.[50] Both he and Socrates, paragons of true virtue, nobly oppose the shallow, foolish, and envious many. The pious man and the philosopher are magnificent brothers living the pious-philosophic life, alike above the roil and muddle of politics.

Euthyphro's Political Ambivalence

We are likely to find immediately compelling what Euthyphro offers here, a picture of the pious life and the philosophic life as a single peak above the mess and flux of political engagement. There is a kind of timeless allure in imagining the upward gaze of the

[48] See Lewis 1985, 238-9, Fustel de Coulanges 1980, 193-4.
[49] See Strauss 1996, 11-12, as well as Burnet 1954 5-6, 9, 14, 18.
[50] Or nearly so. He seems to grant, at the opening of the dialogue, a slight distinction between his way of life and that of Socrates: he sees himself as more inclined than Socrates to bring legal action. For he asks the philosopher, "Surely you don't also happen to have some lawsuit before the King, as I do" (2a3-4). In addition, he seems to recognize that Socrates spends a great deal of time at the Lyceum (2a1-3), where he converses with the young. But he perhaps understands that activity as either (1) a sharing of divine secrets with those who are worthy of them (consider the lures he offers to Socrates at 6b5-6 and at 6c5-7), or (2) an exhortation of the young to virtue (compare 4b7-c1 with *Rep.* 334e5-335b1, along with *Clit.* 407a5-e4 and *Ap.* 29d2-31c3).

transpolitical sage who contemplates, without any concern for courts and kings, what is timeless.[51] And indeed, one side of Euthyphro appears to incline away from political life.[52] For he seems, in the first place, to have no awareness of what was surely a fairly significant political event, the public indictment of his acquaintance Socrates on a capital charge (2a1-b2).[53] Moreover, Socrates himself begins by addressing Euthyphro as if he were not an Athenian at all but a foreigner (2a5-6). And Euthyphro seems to have not merely a lack of knowledge about, but an active disdain for, political life. When he learns of Socrates' involvement in a public indictment, he assumes that someone else, "as is likely, has brought an indictment against you. For I won't charge you (*katagnosomai*) with doing so against another" (2b1-2). He seems to think that it would be shameful to file a lawsuit for the sake of the city or the common good[54]—far more shameful, indeed, than to be the target of such a lawsuit. And he has, in addition, great disdain for the many, who mock him in the assembly when he prophesies the future (3b9-c1). "One should not give any thought to them," he tells Socrates proudly.

Yet it is of some significance that this particular sentence does not end there. Instead, Euthyphro continues: "One should not give any thought to them, but should confront them" (3c4-5). This statement, however, would seem to be self-contradictory. How

[51] See *Rep.* 508e-509c.
[52] The apolitical side of Euthyphro is well noted by commentators. See Saxonhouse 1988, 286, and Lewis 1985, 232, 234, 241, and the compelling discussion in Rosen 1968, 107. Blits (1980, 19) hypothesizes that Euthyphro may be less of a political man than Socrates.
[53] See Lewis 1985, 232.
[54] Here I agree with Lewis 1985, 234: "Apparently he thinks no self-respecting person would prosecute a case on behalf of the city." Perhaps Euthyphro is here adopting the attitude of Socrates. But in that case, his willingness to do so is telling.

is one to confront the many (*homose ienai*: literally, "go to where they are" or "go to close quarters with them") if one is not giving any thought to them?[55]

Indeed, upon closer analysis, the apolitical side of Euthyphro is in great tension with another, entirely different side of him. He seems to gravitate toward a public role in the Athenian assembly, where he stands up to speak "concerning the divine things, predicting for them what will be" (3c1-2). He apparently attempts to lead the Athenians, with the help of his divine inspirations, toward or away from certain political decisions. It is evident now that it was only through an imprecision on Euthyphro's part—a blurring of the revelations that he receives with the revelations that Socrates receives from his *daimonion*—that Euthyphro was able to conflate himself with Socrates. For the revelations of the *daimonion* are radically private. Its voice advises Socrates as to his *own* good or (especially) harm (see *Ap.* 31c7-d6). At most, it advises him as to the good or harm of a few close friends (see *Thg.* 128d-129a). Euthyphro's direct connection to the gods, by contrast, allows or encourages him to make prophecies concerning the good or harm of the entire city of Athens. His divine messages are concerned with the common good, and he feels a compelling need to share them with all of the Athenians—indeed, even at the cost of his own interest or reputation. He serves and continues to serve the many or the city—and despite the price he pays for this political engagement, he refers to it as an ongoing activity and appears to have no plans to stop: "whenever I speak (*hotan lego*) in the Assembly," he says, "they laugh at me" (3c1-2).[56]

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[55] Lewis (1985, 241) recognizes this contradiction but ascribes it to bitterness on Euthyphro's part.

[56] The question of the difference between the revelatory experiences of Euthyphro and those of Socrates, pointed to at the outset of the dialogue, is important and will be returned to after we have learned more about Euthyphro. In emphasizing Euthyphro's concern for the common good, I disagree to some extent with the analysis of Marlo Lewis, who describes

This side of Euthyphro, the side that betrays a passionate concern for the city, for the common good, was in fact already implicit in a comment which we, in our concentration on Euthyphro's admiration of Socrates, too quickly passed over. For Euthyphro did not merely compare Socrates to the public hearth. Before making that comparison, he had expressed—in response to Socrates' praise of Meletus as the ideal statesman, as one who might weed out corrupters of the young like Socrates, and then go on to become "the cause of the most and greatest good things for the city" (3a2-4)—the following sentiment: "So I would wish, Socrates, but I am afraid that the opposite will happen. For he seems to be to be doing evil to the city" (3a6-8). In other words, Euthyphro had expressed in passing the *wish* that, even at the expense of his admired friend Socrates, Meletus would do what was best for the city. Even the death of Socrates would be an acceptable cost; the city's good must trump the admiration for the virtuous and the affection for one's own.[57]

The Necessity of Euthyphro's Ambivalence

Yet it is necessary to keep in mind that we are reading *the* Platonic dialogue on piety. Thus Euthyphro, despite his deviations from what is expected or conventional, is in a way *the* representative of piety in the Platonic corpus. We are thus entitled to wonder: is his political ambivalence a mere idiosyncrasy? Or does Plato seek, through the depiction of Euthyphro's passions, opinions, and quirks, to teach us something about the essential character, the nature, of piety? And if so, why might the pious man par excellence be profoundly ambivalent about politics?

Euthyphro's public prophesying mainly as an effort to gain some relief from his oppressive and radical subjectivity by making a display of himself (1985, 251-252).

[57] On Euthyphro's distance or proximity to Socrates and Meletus, see Versenyi 1982, 32.

We can split this question into two parts. First, why might piety pull one *away* from political life? The answer to this question seems fairly clear. For even that most civic-spirited of all religions, the religion of Ancient Greece—with its gods who hold assemblies and bless kings, gods for whom exclusion from the assembly is the worst of all evils (see Hesiod *Th.* 799-804)—might incidentally endorse a trajectory away from political life. To contemplate the gods of the Pantheon—or to contemplate human life from the perspective of the gods, from an Olympian height—is already to diminish somewhat the importance of political activity. Despite the significance that the gods of the city impart to the city, their smiling on the city is always a smiling down. From the divine and (thus) eternal perspective, a perspective in which a serious believer is inevitably led to partake, the debates over taxes and expenditures and even empire may come to seem trivial. In addition, the experience of divine revelation is often private. Euthyphro's extreme piety locks him more and more into a private communion with the gods.[58] Piety as such, which in its milder forms tends to support the family and the city, may have this kind of atomizing tendency whenever it becomes extreme, for a zealously pious person may feel himself to experience contact with the gods that is more frequent, or more significant, than the contact experienced by the majority or by the political community.[59]

Extreme forms of piety, then, may have an apolitical trajectory. And yet why would *the* representative of piety, according to Plato, feel pulled *back towards* political life? Why would he feel a certain tug that Socrates, the representative of philosophy, does not seem to feel? We cannot attempt to provide an adequate answer to this question until we have

[58] On this aspect of Euthyphro's isolation from Athens, see Lewis 1985, 251-2.
[59] It may also have an anti-democratic tendency, if we are to take Euthyphro's case as paradigmatic. For his contempt for the many (indeed, for all human beings: 5e5-6a1; see Bruell 1999, 124-5) is the direct result of his experience of private revelation and of the inability of the many to understand it.

analyzed the dialogue as a whole. And yet, on the basis of what we have already observed, we may offer at least a provisional answer. The pious man as such, according to Plato, seems to have a passionate concern for justice, in two senses of the word. First, as we have seen, he cares deeply about justice understood as the common good of his community (3a6-9and 3b9-c5)—its happiness as well as its virtue. The richness of his piety itself may depend on his concern (and ability) to benefit other human beings.[60] Second, he cares deeply about justice understood as desert. Euthyphro is in the process of bringing a criminal case against his own father for murder. When he comes face to face with wrongdoing, he is apparently dissatisfied with a reliance on either divine justice or vigilantism. He wants to see justice done now, here on earth, and through the proper (authoritative) political channels. For this reason his piety, if for some reason it cannot be divorced from his concern for justice (understood as desert), will always lead him back toward the political community, as the most conspicuous enforcer of justice.

Socrates' Differentiation

Euthyphro had conflated himself with Socrates. He had seen the pair of them as persecuted prophets, nobly embattled, in an epic struggle with the hopelessly superficial many.[61] Socrates therefore pushes back against that conflation; he differentiates himself from Euthyphro. He does so, first of all, with a reminder that although the Athenians laugh at

[60] See Sheelbeeckx ed. Schrieter 1984, 274: "prayer or mysticism without political love quickly becomes sentimental and irrelevant interiority" (quoted in Perry 1991, 2, 78).
[61] Consider in this context the vehemence of Euthyphro's reaction to Socrates' conventional and "ridiculous" idea of justice at 4b7-c1. That vehemence is perhaps rooted in Euthyphro's shock and disappointment.

Euthyphro, their response to Socrates is not laughter but anger. Being laughed at would be no matter—

> for in fact the Athenians, as it seems to me, do not much care about someone whom they suppose to be clever, unless he is a skillful teacher of his own wisdom. But their spiritedness/anger is aroused (*thumountai*) against anyone who they suppose makes others like himself, either from envy, as you say, or from something else. (3c7-d2)

Euthyphro's response—"That's why I don't at all desire to try out how they are disposed toward me in this regard" (3d3-4)—indicates that while he may have contempt for the many, he nevertheless shrinks from the prospect of their wrath. We note in passing that Socrates introduces the concept of *thumos* into the *Euthyphro* in the context of the city's anger at the wise for teaching.[62]

But the city's response to the wise (or the clever) takes multiple forms. It would seem from Socrates' presentation, as quoted above, that there are two groups at issue here: (1) the merely clever, about whom the city does not much care, and (2) the skillful teachers of their own wisdom, who arouse the city's anger by making others (their students) like themselves.[63] And yet the picture, upon closer examination, is more complicated than this. For Socrates leaves it unclear as to whether there are only two groups or rather three. It is entirely possible that there are three groups: (1) the merely clever, about whom the city does not much care, (2) the skillful teachers of their own wisdom (who do not replicate themselves), about whom the city cares but at whom it does not grow angry, and (3) the teacher-replicators, who incite the city's anger. If there are in fact three groups, it would seem that

[62] As it is Meletus who serves as the representative for the city's case against Socrates, this reference to the city's anger would seem to qualify Socrates' earlier praise. Meletus (or the city) does not prudently correct ignorance, but rather indignantly punishes wisdom. See Blits 1980, 21 for a similar account of this contrast.

[63] Socrates would appear to be unconvinced that the city's wrath at the teacher-replicators is simply the result of their envy. We will have to consider the rest of the dialogue, or rather the dialogue as a whole, in order to attempt to explain his cryptic "or from something else."

Euthyphro the prophet would fall into the middle one. For presumably he is capable, to some extent, of imparting the wisdom that he receives through his unique revelations or inspirations, and yet he is incapable of turning others into prophets like himself.[64] In part for this reason, he, unlike Socrates, does not incite the anger of the city. We may hypothesize that, with regard to the imparting of wisdom in the highest sense, Socrates is likely inclined to believe that there are only two groups: the merely clever and the teacher-replicators.[65] And yet his scheme of classification must remain ambiguous or agnostic on this question, for he cannot settle it without settling the question of reason and revelation as a whole.

Socrates goes even further in his attempt to differentiate himself from Euthyphro. Not only do the Athenians get angry at Socrates (while, by contrast, they laugh at Euthyphro), they also perceive Socrates to be philanthropic while they perceive Euthyphro to be unwilling to teach his own wisdom (3d5-9). So at this point Socrates, who had previously insulted Euthyphro only on the basis of the Athenians' laughter at him, turns to a more direct assault on Euthyphro's character. Euthyphro seems to be guarded, stingy, and selfish, whereas Socrates is philanthropic. And the insults only worsen: "So if, as I was saying just now, they were going to laugh at me, as you say they do at you, it would not be unpleasant to pass the time in the law court joking and laughing. But if they are going to be serious, then how this will turn out now is unclear except to you diviners" (3d9-e4). Having first ignored (by calling him selfish) Euthyphro's account of his efforts to help the Athenians in the assembly, Socrates now redefines those efforts as merely frivolous, pointedly reminding Euthyphro of what he had already emphasized, that Euthyphro is a laughing-

[64] For an account of this incapacity see Lewis 1985, 243.
[65] See Bruell 1999, 75: "The *Euthydemus* makes explicit what the *Laches* only implied or presupposed: that competence as an educator includes, in Socrates' view, or even consists in the capacity to turn another towards philosophy in those cases where it is possible to do so."

stock. Socrates, by contrast, is a serious figure, a noble martyr—though he admits, in his beneficence, to seeing some slight appeal in Euthyphro's activities.

But why insult poor Euthyphro? Does Socrates here reveal, in the very context in which he claims to be philanthropic, that he is in truth malicious, a misanthrope? Or are the very insults that he flings at Euthyphro somehow evidence of, somehow examples of, his philanthropy?

To understand the motive for these insults, we must understand their potential effect. Insults from those whom we most admire have the greatest capacity to shake us, to make us change our ways. Socrates, a man whom Euthyphro greatly admires, calls Euthyphro's deviant behavior in the assembly laughable and frivolous, and he calls Euthyphro selfish. The only remaining avenue for Euthyphro—if he should take these insults to heart, and should wish to avoid being laughable, frivolous, and selfish—would seem to be to abandon or alter his current life, his life of wild public prophesying, and seek a life of more conventional political engagement.[66]

Euthyphro sees himself, and sees Socrates, as living the pious-philosophic life, in opposition to (and above) the political life. While perhaps agreeing with Euthyphro that in the most important sense there are only two possible ways of life, not three, Socrates disagrees with the particular conflation that Euthyphro desires to make. He attempts to move Euthyphro back toward conventional political engagement over the course of the dialogue (consider 14a9-b7). It is an example of Plato's artistry that this movement, on the

[66] Seen in this light, the high praise that Socrates showered on Meletus as the ideal statesman might have been another prong of this strategy to have a positive effect on Euthyphro (rather than to "antagonize" him, as Lewis claims: 1985, 236). If so, Socrates must have realized the need for such a strategy (as a kind of therapy for the diviner) at some point after he accidentally encouraged Euthyphro's disdain for politics (at 2b3).

practical plane, of a particular pious man in the direction of conventional political life is designed to mirror, on the theoretical plane, a similar movement.

Euthyphro's Case and Socrates' Challenge (3e5-5d7)

At the conclusion of the previous section, Socrates prodded Euthyphro—after differentiating his own life from that of the diviner—to predict the outcome of the city's case against him (3e1-3). Now Euthyphro offers a halfhearted prophecy to that effect[67] and turns the conversation toward himself.

This section can be divided into eight subsections. First, Euthyphro dismisses the topic of Socrates' troubles and turns the conversation to his own case (3e5-7). He then explains the identity of the defendant and the substance of the charge: he is prosecuting his own father for murder. The astounded response of Socrates, that Euthyphro must have great wisdom (*sophia*) to attempt such an unconventional act, is confirmed by Euthyphro: he does have such wisdom, by Zeus (3e8-4b3). Next, Socrates makes a "ridiculous" assumption about the identity of the victim—that he too must be a member of the family, if Euthyphro finds it fitting to proceed in a prosecution against his own father—to which Euthyphro responds with a vehement lesson on justice and pollution (4b7-c3). He then describes the specifics of the murder. A hired hand of Euthyphro's, who was working on the family farm, having killed a family servant in a drunken rage, was tied up and thrown into a ditch by Euthyphro's father, who then awaited word from the appropriate religious authority (the exegete) as to what should be done with the man. But the murderer himself died of hunger, the cold, and his bonds before word could come back from the exegete. Therefore

[67] His prophecy is simultaneously inept and correct. See Xenophon *Ap.* 1, 32; and Lewis 1985, 244.

Euthyphro is prosecuting his father for murder (4c3-d5). Euthyphro then describes (and censures) his family's indignant reaction to the prosecution; according to Euthyphro, his family reacts in this way because they know badly (*kakos eidotes*) about how the divine is disposed toward the pious and the impious (4d5-e3). After hearing this rebuke, Socrates asks if Euthyphro himself knows precisely (*akribos epistasthai*) how the divine is disposed, as well as the pious and the impious things. Euthyphro confirms that he does indeed possess such precise knowledge (4e4-5a2). In response, Socrates concocts a plan to learn about the divine from Euthyphro, in order that he might escape or challenge the indictment that has been brought against him by Meletus. Euthyphro agrees to this plan: that is, he agrees to become Socrates' teacher (5a3-5c8). Having clarified that what he is seeking is an *idea* of the pious, meaning here a discrete and intelligible category, Socrates asks Euthyphro for his (first) definition of the pious and the impious (5c8-d7).

A Puzzle

The strangest thing about this section, it is safe to say, is the plan that Socrates concocts. According to that plan Socrates will, after studying under Euthyphro's tutelage, show Meletus that he has become wise in the divine things and thereby persuade him to drop the lawsuit. If Meletus is not persuaded of this, Socrates will tell him to bring a lawsuit against Euthyphro (!), his teacher, " 'on the grounds that he is corrupting the old, me and his own father, by teaching me and by admonishing and punishing him.' " Either way, Socrates

will save his own skin.[68] If Meletus chooses to indict Euthyphro, Socrates will save his own skin by swapping places with Euthyphro—that is, by putting Euthyphro in great danger.[69]

This plan is strange in the first place because it seems doomed to fail. Even if Meletus were to be somehow persuaded that Socrates had become knowledgeable in the divine things, why would he drop the lawsuit for that reason? He is indicting Socrates not only on account of what Socrates does and believes in the present, but primarily on account of what he has done and believed in the past.[70] To assume that Meletus, the law, or the city would be entirely placated upon hearing that Socrates has become wiser, that he has learned a certain lesson about the gods, would be to attribute to them the *Socratic* view that vice is ignorance and that punishment ought (therefore) to be concerned with the present and the future. But the law is concerned not merely with correcting dispositions, but with punishing deeds, and the attribution of the Socratic view of vice, virtue, and punishment to Meletus or to the city seems increasingly out of place.[71]

The plan is also strange because it is terrible for Euthyphro—and almost explicitly so. In the very likely event that Euthyphro, who is laughed at by the entire city, proves to be incapable of persuading Meletus that he is wise in the divine things, the next step of the plan

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[68] See Bruell 1999, 121. Socrates' plan is of course intended to be comic, but I would argue that we ought to read it also in the spirit of seriousness with which Euthyphro appears to hear it. In general, commentators on the *Euthyphro* tend to overemphasize the irony of Socrates' professions of ignorance and his requests to be taught by Euthyphro. Rosen, for instance, concludes that Socrates' primary aim in the dialogue is to give Euthyphro practical and theoretical instruction (1968, 108), but he arrives at this conclusion only on the basis of asserting that such a motive is "in keeping with the spirit of the Platonic dialogues" and that Socrates "surely knows more about piety than Euthyphro" (108).

[69] As an indication of the selfishness of Socrates' plan, consider the ambiguity of the word "*moi*" at 5a3. Socrates asks: "Then, wondrous Euthyphro, wouldn't it be best for me to become your student?" Or more literally, according to the word order: "For me, wondrous Euthyphro, wouldn't it be best to become your student?"

[70] See Blits 1980, 23 and Lewis 1985, 250.

[71] That attribution seems especially out of place when understood in the light of the discussion of the city's anger at wise teachers (3c6-d1), a discussion which, as we have seen, served to correct the more positive earlier portrait of Meletus (at 2c2-3a5).

is (explicitly) the indictment of Euthyphro by Meletus on a charge of corruption. And Euthyphro, who has already begun the process of converting himself from a laughingstock into an object of indignation (4d5), will be left alone on the hot seat, attempting to defend himself before a city which, in his view, already mocks, envies, and misunderstands him.

The puzzle of this section, then, is this: why does Euthyphro agree to this plan, despite its explicit badness for him? He is not, as many commentators have assumed, simply stupid.[72] And he is not so overconfident as to be unaware of the danger that the city might pose to him if he should choose to become a teacher: he had, moments before, expressed a certain caution in that regard (recall 3d3-4).[73] So why does he accept, and accept so readily, this wild and detrimental plan (5b9-c3)? Moreover, and connected with this question, why does Socrates frame the plan in this way (so as to seem explicitly detrimental to Euthyphro), as if knowing that Euthyphro would accept it on those terms?[74] To answer this question or pair of questions, we need to examine this section more closely in an effort to understand Euthyphro's character. What kind of a man accepts such a plan?

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[72] See, for instance, Reynolds 1988, 42. As I will argue on the basis of 4b7-c3 and d5-e3, Euthyphro is far from being the dullest knife in the drawer; indeed, he shows a certain inclination toward the philosophic position.

[73] This apparent contradiction between Euthyphro's previous attitude and his acceptance of Socrates' plan is noted by Lewis (1985, 241).

[74] According to Lewis (1985, 251), Socrates made the plan sound detrimental to Euthyphro precisely in the hope that Euthyphro would decline, so as to end the conversation; but his "stratagem backfires." But this interpretation, and indeed Lewis' interpretation as a whole (see 64, 232, 250, 252, 257), neglects the (non-ironic) desire of Socrates to learn something from Euthyphro. Lewis notes well the initially terse and aloof responses of Socrates, but he fails to observe a crucial shift in Socrates' attitude: his interest in Euthyphro is piqued somewhere in this section (see Bruell 1999, 120), and from that point onward he guides and voluntarily extends, indeed nearly clings to, the conversation (consider 6c9-10, 9c-d, 11e2-5, 12e10-13a2, 15c11-e2). Lewis' interpretation, that neither man wishes to converse, makes the conversation's continuation difficult to explain.

The most striking fact about Euthyphro, as may already be evident, is his devotion to justice.[75] He understands justice to mean giving people what they deserve. The most striking fact about his justice, in turn, is its impartiality. Justice means, according to Euthyphro, giving people what they deserve without any consideration of what relation they may have to you, without regard to any particular attachments or prejudices. Preferential treatment is necessarily unjust.

The impartiality of his justice, which was implicit in the revelation that he is prosecuting his own father for murder, is made explicit when Socrates asks him whether the victim, the man whom his father murdered, was also a member of Euthyphro's family; "Or isn't it clear? For surely you wouldn't proceed against him for murder on behalf of an outsider" (4b4-6). As Euthyphro's vehement response to this question is both telling and subtly complex, I shall quote it in full:

> It's ridiculous (or 'laughable': *geloion*), Socrates, that you suppose that it makes any difference whether the dead man is an outsider or of the family, rather than that one should be on guard only for whether the killer killed with justice or not; and if it was with justice, to let it go, but if not, to proceed against him—if, that is, the killer shares your hearth and table. For the pollution turns out to be equal if you knowingly associate with such a man and do not purify yourself and also him by proceeding against him in a lawsuit. (4b7-c3)

[75] Certainly one could question the purity of Euthyphro's motives in prosecuting his father, especially in light of the lengthy hiatus between the crime and the prosecution (see West 1984, 44 fn. 15). But it seems to me that we can learn more from the dialogue by first considering the best version of Euthyphro—by attempting to understand him as he understands himself—rather than by writing him off immediately as a hypocrite. Compare Ranasinghe 2012, 21. See also Burnet, who provides a plausible reason for the hiatus (1954, 25).

With vehemence,[76] Euthyphro rebukes Socrates, whom he had moments before considered worthy of admiration, for conflating the just with the love of one's own. Euthyphro is proud of his selfless devotion to impartial justice.[77] He would not avenge a son before a stranger. He is contemptuous of those who dilute or neglect the just by pursuing the interest of family and friends. The love of one's own is not a moral concern. In fact, justice (understood as the impartial giving to each of what they deserve) may and often will demand a *sacrifice* of the interest of one's own. Particular affections and attachments, then, must be transcended in the name of what is moral.

Yet it suffices to articulate Euthyphro's stance in this way—as a moral stance against the love of one's own—to call forth the objection that the love of one's own, too, is moral. Indeed, the love of one's own can be articulated in the form of a definition of justice: justice means helping friends and harming enemies (see *Rep.* 332a8-c8).[78] Thus Euthyphro is not merely taking a moral stand against amoral affection, but rather (implicitly) opposing one definition of justice to another. Justice in the true sense of the word is not, according to Euthyphro, helping friends and harming enemies but rather giving to each what he deserves, in a spirit of impartial rigor. His piety or his virtue, it seems, has led him to overcome a common political (and familial) definition of justice, a definition that is "particularist" or determined by particular attachments.

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[76] In the Greek, the first words out of his mouth are, "Ridiculous, O Socrates!"

[77] Ranasinghe (2012) concludes too hastily that "Euthyphro's motives and precedents are pre-political rather than ethical," and that Euthyphro, whose piety is "essentially selfish," is "concerned with piety not with justice" (24, compare 35). His case against the genuineness of Euthyphro's moral concerns appears to hinge on a faulty comparison with Meletus (21-22).

[78] And if one's friends in the broadest sense are one's fellow citizens, then this definition of justice will be equivalent, at the political level, to another definition of justice: serving the common good. Consider Stauffer 2001, 43.

Indeed, his piety or his virtue has led him a step in the direction of a more philosophic position. Piety, as such, appears to have a philosophic trajectory. As evidence for this claim, let us consider briefly a portion of the *Republic*. In Book One, Socrates shows Polemarchus that his definition of justice as helping friends and harming enemies is internally incoherent. For buried within that definition—more precisely, within the word 'friend' and within the word 'enemy'—is a tacit (yet necessary) assumption or hope that one's friends are good and one's enemies are bad. But this implies that Polemarchus' definition of justice as helping friends and harming enemies (justice as partiality) was only compelling to him when held in conjunction with an assumption or hope that this form of justice would align perfectly with justice as impartial desert. His initial definition of justice, then, prescribed two different and potentially contradictory things at once. It prescribed both (1) helping friends and harming enemies, and (2) doing good to the good and bad to the bad. What Socrates helps him to see, that his first definition of justice was buttressed at its very core by a second and ultimately incompatible definition, reveals that the second definition is in fact dearer to Polemarchus' heart, or deeper in his soul.[79] Or, more cautiously, it reveals that his desire to benefit his friends (and harm his enemies), considered in isolation from his desire to be impartial in respecting and rewarding true virtue (and in condemning and punishing vice), does not constitute the whole of his desire for justice. It is not Socratic

[79] What I have called the second definition, justice as impartial desert, in fact remains for the most part merely implicit in the discussion with Polemarchus. For it is, just after its initial appearance (334d9-11), veiled by the qualification that the good man must not only be but also seem good (334e10-335a2) and then buried within the synthesis that Socrates forms by combining it with the first definition (335a6-10). But the 'pure' version of the definition (justice as impartial desert) is not only mentioned but undoubtedly pointed to throughout the discussion (see Stauffer 2001, 41-45). And while the criterion of friendship is quickly reintroduced, the appeal to impartiality has made its mark: only friends who are good ought to be helped, and only enemies who are bad ought to be harmed (335a6-10). In other words, the unthinking embrace of one's own (friends), simply because they are one's own, is quickly abandoned.

dialectics but a fervent piety, for Euthyphro, which has led him toward an understanding of the importance, for any understanding of justice, of mitigating blind partiality; that is, led him several rungs up the ladder toward the philosophic position.[80]

Yet it cannot lead him all of the way. Euthyphro, the Platonic representative of piety, is held back from the philosophic position by at least three lingering attachments. First, he cannot follow Polemarchus where Socrates leads him next, down the path toward an understanding of the problems latent even within justice as desert. This is due in part to the appeal he finds in his punitive fervor. For if he came to agree with Socrates and Polemarchus that it is not the work of the just man to harm anyone (335d11-12), then the shining allure of his quest to punish his father would fade. Moreover, as we will soon have the opportunity to observe, Euthyphro believes with great passion that the just is the lawful. But by the time of the movement described in the previous paragraph (the movement on the part of Polemarchus from a definition of justice as helping friends and harming enemies toward a definition of justice as desert), the definition of the just as the lawful had already been quietly abandoned (331c1-332a10). And finally, Euthyphro is held back from the philosophic position by his belief in a certain supernatural force he calls pollution (*miasma*).[81] That Plato believed in the reality of pollution as a fact of human psychology, as a fact of human nature, is likely. That he believed in its reality as a supernatural or divine phenomenon is doubtful, given the casual manner of the Athenian Stranger in Book IX of Plato's *Laws* as he assigns

[80] Perhaps the *Euthyphro* is in this way intended as a response to Aristophanes' *Clouds*. It is not (only) Socratic philosophy which can encourage father-beating, but (also) traditional morality or piety, when they are thought through. Compare Zuckert 2009, 644: "Euthyphro understands the law and justice to consist in rules of behavior to which everyone agrees and to which everyone is, therefore, subject. In this respect he is more like a rationalist philosopher than an advocate of piety, traditionally understood."

[81] On pollution, see McPherran 1985, 114ff.

various amounts of pollution (and various rites of purification) to various crimes in accordance with social utility (871b-874a).

Two Oddities

Euthyphro's account of justice, according to the foregoing analysis, would seem to be clearly stated, although extreme. Justice means the impartial giving to each of what he deserves. One must avenge the death of a non-relative, even if that means punishing a relative. But a pair of strange twists appear at the conclusion of his scornful lesson for Socrates, at the conclusion of his lesson on justice and pollution.

First, partiality seems to creep back in. Previously, Euthyphro rebuked Socrates for what seemed to be his assumption that justice ought to be tempered by, or ought simply to mean, loving or benefiting one's own. For Socrates had implied, naively, that one ought not to prosecute one's own father unless it was to avenge the death of a family member. Euthyphro's pride (and his rebuke) seemed to be grounded in his superior willingness to ignore or even sacrifice the interest of his own. He would punish his own father in the name of justice, in order to avenge the death of a man who was not kin. The punishment would be bad for his father, bad for a man very close to Euthyphro; but precisely on account of that fact the enforcement of justice in this case would be all the more admirable, all the more noble.

And yet, at the end of his statement on impartial justice, his stance undergoes a startling (though implicit) reversal. The reason that one should prosecute one's father, he says, is to "purify yourself and also him" of incipient pollution. But if pollution is a terrible evil, this seems to mean that the punishment—far from being bad for the father—is in fact

the father's greatest good. But if the punishment of his father is *good* for the father, then is Euthyphro simply relapsing into a definition of justice as helping one's own (or into a simple and amoral love of one's own)? Moreover, Euthyphro qualifies his original statement on what justice requires: it requires not the impartial prosecution of all unjust killers, but rather the prosecution of those who share one's hearth and table. Is the shrinking of his sphere of concern—such that he focuses on prosecuting only family members and close associates—not, after all, evidence of a noble impartiality but rather an *instance* of the love of one's own?[82]

Worse still, what seemed to be a noble or even self-sacrificial devotion to (the enforcement of) justice on Euthyphro's part, to the prosecution of his father, now appears to be in his *own* interest. For without prosecuting, he too will incur pollution in his soul, which is surely to be counted among the worst of all evils. If the prosecution of his father is good for Euthyphro, then might his action of prosecuting, which he had seemed to flaunt as noble, be motivated in fact by self-interest?[83]

In order to avoid imputing these motives to Euthyphro, we can say that his focus on the family—that is, his focus on the punishment of family members first—is dictated not by an understanding of justice as helping one's own, nor by a simple and amoral affection, but

[82] That Euthyphro falls victim to the very conflation that he criticizes (the conflation of the just with the interest of one's own) may also be indicated by the fact that the murdered man was a laborer belonging to him (4c4). As Lewis notes, Euthyphro "does not simply deny the moral relevance of family ties" (1985, 246). See also Blits 1980, 22. It seems to me that Blits goes astray in characterizing Euthyphro as a man for whom justice is subordinate to, rather than altered or partly determined by, sacred family ties or familial piety.

[83] There may be another ambiguity here, an ambiguity as to whether the pollution has *already* fallen upon Euthyphro (you must "purify yourself" by prosecuting, at 4c2-3) or *will* fall upon him if he fails to prosecute ("the pollution *turns out to be* equal" if you fail to prosecute, at 4c1-2). If so, this ambiguity may be indicative of an uncertainty on Euthyphro's part as to whether vice is intrinsically bad or only bad as a marker of harm in the future. (Of course, he may mean simply that the pollution, which has already begun to infect him, will only worsen with time if he fails to act.) More generally, the ambiguity is necessitated by an uncertainty to which I will turn shortly. Euthyphro appears to be uncertain as to whether the law commands prosecution as necessary (that is, he is already infected by pollution) or only non-association (that is, he could still escape the pollution).

by a practical constraint. One simply cannot go around punishing (and purifying) everyone. A sad necessity, then, not justice, dictates the shrinking of one's sphere of concern. But in that case, the requirements of justice, or the single-minded focus on the justice of one's soul, will have to be tempered somewhat. And the status of punishment for Euthyphro—is it good or bad for the punished?—remains pressing. One might, of course, argue that Euthyphro does not contradict himself, for he never explicitly claims that punishment is bad for the punished. But his evident pride in his noble overcoming of partiality (by doing what is bad for his own) and the moral vehemence of his response to Socrates (he does not have the tone of one correcting a well-meant error), as well as his later references to punishment among the gods (5e-6a) and the shirking of punishment among men (8c), argue against this.

To uncover the second oddity implicit in Euthyphro's lesson on justice and pollution, we must make a slight qualification to the preceding discussion. For that discussion did not emphasize strongly enough a particular aspect of Euthyphro's morality: namely, the extent to which his concern for justice or desert, or his concern for virtue more generally, takes the form of a concern for law and lawfulness. The concern for justice may, though perhaps it need not, take the form of an awareness of categorical and sanctioned rules of action (that is, obligations or restrictions). Euthyphro's concern for justice is decidedly of this sort. His explanation to Socrates of what one ought to do (or what it is necessary to do: *dein*) is not an explanation of his idiosyncratic proclivity, nor of an optional ideal, but of a universal obligation to act in a certain way. But what, exactly, does the law obligate us to do, according to Euthyphro?

The answer, upon examination, is far from clear. For the law seems to exist on three tiers at once. First, Euthyphro seems to say that one is obligated to prosecute *any* unjust killer, categorically. That he somehow views this law as unconditional—although he goes on

to add conditions—is indicated by his reiteration of it in the next section of the dialogue: "Now contemplate, Socrates, what a great proof I will tell you that the law is so disposed … that one is not to give way to the impious one, whoever he happens to be" (5e2-5).[84] But in the second place, Euthyphro admits that the law has a qualification: it is only if the killer "shares your hearth and table" that you are obligated to prosecute. And the third version of the law qualifies or loosens the obligation still further: one would only receive the sanction of the law (pollution, which is finally mentioned here) if one both failed to prosecute such a person *and* knowingly associated with him.

It is evident that this third law is meant to be, somehow, of a piece with the law that precedes it. For what I am calling the third law is presented not as a qualification or alteration of the second but as its justification.[85] Now, the fact that three different versions of the law can exist simultaneously in Euthyphro's mind, apparently without his recognizing any distinctions between them, is less striking than the fact that the laws require different courses of action. Indeed, according to the first and the second versions of the law, Euthyphro's prosecution of his father is obligatory. But according to the third law, by which one will only incur pollution as a result of knowing association (*sunēis suneidos*: 4c2) with the killer, Euthyphro's prosecution is *non*-obligatory. He could escape the punishment of the law simply by avoiding association with his father. And yet the law which does not obligate the prosecution is presented, by Euthyphro, as the justification for following the law which does.

Now, it suffices to lay out this difficulty to call forth the objection that Euthyphro cannot possibly notice or understand it. However, that may be precisely the point. Through Euthyphro's words—even or precisely if they are words that such a man would never quite

[84] See also 5d9-e1: "to proceed against whoever does injustice…whether he happens to be a father or mother or anyone else at all…"
[85] See the word *gar* at 4c1 ("For the pollution…").

understand—Plato may want to indicate to us some necessary ambivalence, some confusion endemic to a man of his type. But what could that ambivalence be? Why might Euthyphro, in other words, be drawn to a hazy understanding of law according to which his action (the prosecution of his father) might be considered *both* obligatory *and* non-obligatory?

Euthyphro's Nobility

A potential clue is provided by a puzzling statement that Euthyphro makes in the wake of his lesson on law and pollution. Having described the specifics of the murder, as well as his family's reaction to the impending prosecution, Euthyphro is asked by Socrates whether he has "such precise knowledge about how the divine things are disposed, and the pious and impious things, that, assuming that these things were done just as you say, you don't fear that by pursuing a lawsuit against your father, you in turn may happen to be doing an impious act?" And Euthyphro's response to this question is strange: "For there would be no benefit for me, Socrates, nor would Euthyphro be any different from (or 'surpass': *diapherot*) the many human beings, if I didn't know all such things precisely" (4e9-5a2).

Perhaps the oddest thing about this response—apart from its not exactly answering the question[86]—is that Euthyphro appears to draw a distinction here between his benefit and his strangeness or superiority. Is that strangeness, then, not beneficial to him? But has he not implied, repeatedly, that his rejection of the norm—the norm of the hopelessly superficial

[86] The response only answers the question if taken in conjunction with two things: (1) the observation that Euthyphro is choosing to prosecute his father, and (2) an implicit thesis that no one ever chooses to act contrary to his own benefit. More precisely, the implicit thesis would be that Euthyphro himself never chooses to act contrary to his own benefit, but we must assume here (in accordance with Euthyphro's own opinion) that no human being could surpass him in virtue or nobility (see 3c1-5 and 5e5-6); therefore we would have to conclude that the thesis applied to all other human beings as well.

and envious many (3b9-c5), who not only lack the power of prophecy (3c1-2) but are likely to hold, as Socrates does, ridiculous definitions of justice or law (4b7-c3)—is indeed a benefit? Or is Euthyphro perhaps confused as to whether that rejection is a benefit or not? Perhaps he feels the allure, at times, of seeing his strange and solitary life as a noble sacrifice.[87]

Indeed, this view of his own strangeness—that it is or entails a noble sacrifice—was perhaps implied by his repeatedly returning to "confront" the thankless many in the assembly, suffering their mockery and slander in order to benefit or serve them (3b7-c5). It may have been implied also by his strong desire to brag about his strangeness and (as the finest example of that strangeness) his prosecution of his father (2a4, 3e6-7; consider in this light the slow and suspenseful buildup he offers before the revelation that he is prosecuting his own father for murder: 3e8-4a10).[88] For that desire to brag (or the intensity of it) may have implied a dissatisfaction with his current condition—as if his life as a deviant prophet, mocked and slandered despite his noble service, could only be rendered satisfactory to him if it were recognized, honored, or rewarded. We may hypothesize, then, that Euthyphro has a desire to sacrifice his own good; or, at the very least, he has a desire to understand his actions as self-sacrificial. More precisely, we may say that he has such a desire paired with a

[87] In mentioning his benefit, Euthyphro speaks of himself in the first person. But in mentioning his strangeness, he speaks of himself in the third person, as "a disinterested witness to his own greatness" (Lewis 1985, 249, compare Burnet 1954, 28). This shift is perhaps intended to indicate some connection between nobility and self-awareness (consider Xenophon *Mem.* II.1.19 and III.6.2).

[88] Blits (1980, 21) recognizes Euthyphro's pride in "relishing the gravity of his act," and Lewis notes his effort "to create suspense" (1985, 245). Geach (1966, 369) goes astray in attributing Euthyphro's manner here to "reluctance" to reveal the truth about his case.

second one: a desire to pursue his own good or to understand his own actions as good for him.[89]

An understanding of Euthyphro's nobility may allow us to see his lesson on justice and pollution in a new light. That lesson began with a tone of pride and moral vehemence: unlike Socrates, with his "ridiculous" ideas about justice, Euthyphro understands justice as the impartial dispensation of rewards and punishments according to desert. He is selflessly devoted to justice, sacrificing even the interest of his own, nobly enforcing justice or the law by undertaking to punish his father. And yet the introduction of a clear sanction for the law (the sanction of pollution) complicates the issue, as we have seen. At the precise moment when punishment becomes good for the punished (that is, for Euthyphro's father), the noble enforcement of justice becomes good for the noble (that is, for Euthyphro). In punishing his father, Euthyphro claims to purify them both of incipient pollution. But if the prosecution of his father (the enforcement of justice) is good for Euthyphro—or, still worse, if it is ultimately selfish—can it still be noble?

The situation, however, is more complicated than that. For at the precise moment when the sanction of pollution is introduced—that is, at the precise moment when lawfulness becomes clearly *good* for the lawful—two things happen. First, Euthyphro implies that the prosecution of his father may yet be, at least in part, a selfless act, an act done for the sake of purifying his *father* of pollution. Is he then slipping, as it were, into an understanding that would call the love of one's own, or the benefiting of one's own, selfless and moral? Second, the law itself undergoes, as we have seen, a transformation. It becomes,

[89] Perhaps on account of this pairing, Euthyphro's nobility has been overlooked by commentators, who see him as merely selfish (see Hoerber 1958, 106-107, Neumann 1966, 268-272, Blits 1980, 34, and Ranasinghe 2012, 24). Blits calls Euthyphro a utilitarian with no understanding of the noble except as the useful or the necessary, a man indifferent to the beautiful (34)—but he does so on the basis of attributing to Euthyphro arguments introduced into the dialogue by Socrates.

rather than a strict law, a *lax* law, according to which the prosecution of the father is *not* obligatory—for the failure to engage in the prosecution will not necessarily result in punishment. In other words, at the precise moment when the law acquires a clear sanction and thus becomes clearly good for the lawful, the law itself transforms, so as to render Euthyphro's action *more* than lawful—that is, 'beyond the call.'

We are now in a position to understand the allure of a lax law—that is, of a law which does not require much more than inaction, mediocrity, or the absence of vice. For a lax law, by allowing exceptionally noble or virtuous action to remain *non*-obligatory, beyond the reach of the sanction of law, allows noble or virtuous action to remain of *unclear* benefit for the doer. Paradoxically, it is a lax law (rather than a strict law) which allows—if lawfulness is clearly good for the lawful and (thus) of ambiguous nobility—the greatest opportunity for action that is noble, risky, selfless, exalted, or beyond the call of mere duty. And yet, as we have already observed, Euthyphro simultaneously believes that his action, the prosecution of his father, *is* obligatory according to the law (and thus necessarily good for him). Indeed, the lax law, according to which his action may be bad for him, is only introduced as a justification for following the strict law. The law which makes the prosecution of the father potentially bad for Euthyphro, in other words, is the justification for the law which makes that prosecution necessarily good. Multiple conceptions of the law, it seems, must float about in his mind as if they were one.

What we may now call with some confidence Euthyphro's nobility—his apparent desire to sacrifice his own interest for the sake of what is of greater dignity than himself[90] (for the city, for the law, for virtue)—can help to explain, at last, the biggest puzzle of this section: Euthyphro's agreement to the harmful plan of Socrates. It is true that the plan has at

[90] See Bruell 1999, 75 for a similar definition.

least one obvious advantage for Euthyphro: the prospect of fame (5b2-7, 5c1-8).[91] And it is also true that he is overconfident as to his odds of success in the event of his indictment by Meletus (5b9-c3). But the primary allure of this plan and of his role in it, I would suggest, is the prospect of undergoing a great risk in order to become the noble savior of Socrates in his moment of danger.

The Framing of the Dialogue

We are now in a position to consider the framing of the *Euthyphro* as a whole. If we articulate the plot of the dialogue in specific terms, we arrive at this formulation: Euthyphro is called upon, by Socrates, to teach him the pious and thereby reconcile him to Meletus and the city of Athens. But if we articulate the plot of the dialogue in general terms, we arrive at this formulation: a pious man is called upon, by a representative of philosophy, to teach him the pious and thereby to reconcile him to the political community as such. It would seem, then, that the stakes of the dialogue are very high. Those stakes come to seem especially high if we recall, revisiting the *Republic*, that unless "political power and philosophy coincide in the same place," there is "no rest from ills for cities … nor I think for humankind" (473d2-6). And if, as Socrates in the *Republic* goes on to argue, the most fundamental obstacle to the rule of wisdom in the cities is an aversion, on the part of the philosophers, to political life or to rule (519c-e), then the reconciliation of the philosopher to the political community (by the pious man) would be at least the first step toward a rest from ills for all humanity.[92]

[91] And yet Socrates does not clearly dangle the carrot of fame until *after* Euthyphro has already accepted the challenge (5c4-8; here I disagree with Blits 1980, 24).

[92] Consider, however, *Tht.* 176a5-9: "But it's not possible for the evils either to perish, Theodorus—for it's a necessity that there always be something contrary to the good—or for them to be established among gods, but of necessity they haunt mortal nature and this

Euthyphro, it would seem, has been given a mighty task. Saving Socrates' life may be merely the first step toward saving the world.

But why Euthyphro, of all people? He seems to be an unlikely candidate—this wild diviner intent on prosecuting his father in a highly dubious case—for teaching the pious to Socrates and thereby reconciling philosophy and politics. Indeed, and stranger still, it is precisely in the wake of learning about Euthyphro's peculiar case that Socrates conceives his plan to learn the pious from Euthyphro. In other words, Socrates conceives a desire to learn the pious from Euthyphro just after learning of Euthyphro's confident and radical deviation from Athenian convention, piety, and morality. Given the sacred status of the fathers according to traditional Greek piety, and the sacred status of a son's obligation to his father, Euthyphro's deviation is indeed extraordinary.[93] That deviation is justified with a claim of precise (or even scientific: *epistasthai*, 4e1-5a2) knowledge, a claim of knowledge in turn connected with claims of personal revelation. Perhaps, given the radical doubts that Socrates goes on to express about the Greek religious tradition (6a7-b4, 6b7-c4), it is something in Euthyphro's very deviation from that tradition that makes him, in Socrates' opinion, the one man who might be capable of teaching him the pious in a satisfactory way. And yet his deviation, on its own, does not seem sufficient to explain Socrates' interest in learning from

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region here; it's for this reason that one ought to try to flee from here to there as soon as possible." See also *Laws* 713e3-6.

[93] See Burkert 1985, 249, as well as Fustel de Coulanges 1980, 111-123: "Upon [the father] rests the domestic worship; he can almost say, like the Hindu, 'I am the god.' When death shall come, he will be a divine being whom his descendants will invoke (112); "The father is the supreme chief of the domestic religion" (118); "Justice for wife and son was not in the city, because it was in the house. The chief of the family was their judge, placed upon a judgment seat in virtue of his marital and parental authority, in the name of the family and under the eyes of the domestic divinities" (121).

him. We will have to reconsider to question—'Why Euthyphro?'—when we have gathered further evidence from the dialogue.[94]

Euthyphro's Knowledge

Before moving on to the attempt to define the pious, with which the rest of the dialogue is concerned, we ought to say a word about the character of Euthyphro's knowledge. For in this section of the dialogue, Euthyphro claims, three times, upon being prodded by Socrates, that he has possession of knowledge; those claims grow bolder and bolder. First, Socrates says that Euthyphro—unlike the vulgar many, who would shy away from prosecuting their own fathers for murder—must be "far advanced in wisdom (*sophia*)." And Euthyphro responds: "Far indeed, by Zeus, Socrates" (4b3). A pious man seems compelled, according to his understanding of virtue, to take certain actions. To carry out and to justify the selection of those actions, he must claim knowledge of things about which the philosopher, who is unconcerned or less concerned with action, may remain agnostic or admittedly ignorant (see *Ap.* 21d4-8). Euthyphro, who understands himself to be obligated to prosecute his own father, bolsters his claim to wisdom with a religious oath.

After hearing the details of the case, Socrates raises the stakes. For he has in the interim learned of three things: the radical specificity and ambiguity of the circumstances surrounding the murder, the extent to which Euthyphro is deviating from conventional

[94] In stressing Euthyphro's deviation from Greek orthodoxy, I side with Burnet 1954, 5, Neumann 1966, and Klonoski 1985, 133-134 in opposition to Allen 1970, 9-12 and Furley 1985. Furley attempts to resuscitate "the pre-Burnet position of seeing in Euthyphro a stickler for adherence to received tradition," but his case depends on an insufficient attention to the irony of Socrates' expressed desire to learn from Euthyphro in order to be reconciled to the city of Athens (see Furley 1985, 207-208). Although the expression of that desire is indeed significant, and tells us something about Plato's intention, it cannot be used in support of the claim that Euthyphro is in fact an orthodox traditionalist.

piety, and the confidence with which he is doing so. Accordingly, he asks Euthyphro in this instance not about wisdom of the correct (*orthos*[95]) but about precise and scientific knowledge of the pious. Swearing the most solemn oath known to the Greeks, he asks, "But before Zeus, do you, Euthyphro, suppose that you know (*epistasthai*: the word used for scientific knowledge) these things so accurately regarding how the divine things are disposed, and the pious and impious things, that, assuming these things were done just as you say, you don't fear that by pursuing a lawsuit against your father, you in turn may happen to be doing an impious act? (4e4-8). Confident action in specific circumstances requires not merely general wisdom (for instance, an understanding that one ought to prosecute unjust killers) but precise or scientific knowledge (for instance, an understanding of which killers are unjust and which are just). Euthyphro must know the categories of just and unjust (in order to know the categories of just and unjust killings: 4b9-c1), as well as the categories of the pious and the impious (4e2-3), with such scientific precision that he is able to apply that knowledge even to his own case—with all of its radical and unrepeatable particularity and ambiguity—in order to have total confidence that his father's act and the prosecution with which he is now responding to it fall, respectively, within the bounds of 'unjust killing' and 'pious act.' This is a tall order.

In the third instance, Socrates gets Euthyphro to agree that the pious, about which he has claimed to have precise or scientific knowledge, has a single *idea*.[96] It is not necessary for us to investigate the 'theory of forms' in the *Republic*, *Phaedo*, or *Phaedrus* in order to understand what Socrates means here. For he explains that he means two things: the pious is

[95] I will not call a great deal of attention to the shifting of terms in this section (*orthos* or 'correct' at 4b1, *hosion* or 'pious' at 4e2), for in this instance (and perhaps generally) these terms seem to be blurred together in Euthyphro's mind to the point of equivalence (for evidence of this blurring, see 5d8-e4).

[96] More precisely, he gets Euthyphro to agree that the *im*pious has a single idea, but in the context this agreement indicates that the pious does as well.

(1) "the same as itself in every action," and (2) the impious is "opposite to everything pious" (5d1-3). These two categories of the pious and the impious, in other words, exhibit (1) total self-similarity, and (2) total opposition to each other.[97] They are unified and discrete. There is not a spectrum of 'piousness' within the category of the pious itself: the pious is all one.[98] Neither is there a spectrum between (that is, connecting) the pious and the impious: the two do not take their place upon a spectrum, but are entirely opposite.

It must be granted—and it has been noted by commentators—that this manner of proceeding may be unfair to Euthyphro, or to piety.[99] For it seems a bit of an imposition to direct, or to force, a pious man to claim knowledge of a discrete, unified, and knowable *idea* of the pious (and of the impious). Ordinary piety, left to its own devices, may not make such grand and theoretical claims. A pious person, indeed, may stress not generality and abstraction but rather specificity—what is pious is obedience, on the part of human beings, to more particular directives obtained through personal revelation, especially through the voice of conscience.[100] To draw from Euthyphro a claim to knowledge of an *idea* of piety, having first implanted that claim in the first place, is to drag him off of his own turf and onto the philosopher's turf, upon which the debate can occur to the satisfaction—or rather, to the unfair advantage—of the philosopher. If Socrates is able, as he will in a moment prove himself to be, to pick apart Euthyphro's attempted definitions of the pious, that is

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[97] For a more detailed analysis of what Socrates means here, see Allen 1970, 73-74.

[98] This non-spectral character of the pious is indicated not only by its self-similarity but also by its opposition to the impious. For if there were a spectrum within the category 'pious,' certain pious things (the ones that were less pious) could not be said to be opposite to the impious, for they would not be 'as opposite' as other, more pious things. If the pious consisted of a spectrum, in other words, the meaning of 'opposite' would break down.

[99] Blits, for instance, calls Euthyphro's agreement here "thoughtless" (1980, 26). And Geach refers to the insistence on a search for an *idea* of the pious as an example of "the Socratic fallacy" (1966, 371). For a compelling rebuttal to Geach, see Anderson 1969, 463-464.

[100] The feeling of pollution or incipient pollution (4c1-3) may be related to (or even evidence of) particular directives of this kind.

only because Euthyphro was never inclined to believe in human access to such definitions in the first place. Thus the dialogue veers off course at this point, and any "lessons" that are henceforth brought to light can be safely discarded.

And yet the method is not, perhaps, so unfair as all that. Euthyphro, for his part, certainly seems to regard it as fair. His assent to the existence of an *idea* of piety and an *idea* of impiety is, after all, one of his most emphatic agreements in the dialogue: "By all means, doubtless, Socrates: *pantos dēpou* (5d6).[101] He agrees, both here and soon after (5e3, 5e10), that he possesses not only precise knowledge of the *idea* of the pious but also the ability to teach it to Socrates. He never objects to the method employed, but rather attempts to adapt his answers to match what it requires of him (8b7-9, 9e1-3) and becomes intensely frustrated when he finds himself unable to provide a coherent answer according to those requirements (11b6-8). Is there common ground, then, between the philosophic method and the pious method? Indeed, the opinion that there is an *idea* of the pious was, perhaps, implicit in Euthyphro's own statements about law, justice, and pollution (4b7-c3).[102] For in this dialogue it was the lawful view, not the philosophic view, which first insisted on the existence and knowability of radically discrete and opposite categories of being. Perhaps, then, even the voice of conscience is not so radically particular (or so lacking in speech, in articulate and general claims) as we claimed that it was; a piety which consists in an obedience to radically idiosyncratic directives or revelations of conscience may also imply or depend upon some notion of an *idea*. For—to touch only upon one aspect of the question—the initial identification of a particular directive *as* the voice of the gods or the voice of conscience would seem to require, in the first place, some intelligible standard or category by which to

[101] See Burnet 1954: "Euthyphro appears to be quite familiar with the terminology used by Socrates, and accepts it without demur" (32, see also 37).
[102] It may also have been implicit in his statements about his family's ignorance (4e1-3).

differentiate that voice from, for instance, the voice of hunger or lust.[103] According to this line of reasoning, then, the agreement as to the existence and intelligibility of unified and opposite categories of being may be, far from an imposition of the philosophic view on the pious or commonsense view, rather the reverse.[104] But in the absence of further evidence, we must leave an asterisk here as to the fairness or unfairness of the method of procedure by which Socrates searches for an understanding of piety.

[103] See *Ion* 534b-536d with Bruell 1999, 160-162.

[104] This debate, if its terms can be somewhat recast, could be of some relevance to the validity of certain versions of contemporary "ethical intuitionism." For one might conclude that intuitions can only be taken seriously when accompanied by the tacit assumption that they are more than *mere* intuitions; that is, only when accompanied by the tacit assumption that there is, behind or beyond them, some unified essence or rationally intelligible category which they discover, by which they are directed, or to which they respond.

Chapter Three:
Defining the Pious

Definition One: The Pious as the (Punitively) Just (5d8-6e10)

Having agreed to the terms according to which Socrates wants to be taught, Euthyphro provides the dialogue's first definition of the pious (5d8-5e2). Without pausing he offers, unprompted, a "great proof" that this definition is accurate (5e2-6a6). There follows in the wake of this proof a lengthy digression by Socrates, who speaks with incredulity about the Athenian religious tradition while Euthyphro, intervening, twice attempts to lure him into listening to fantastic and secret stories about the gods (6a7-6c7). Socrates, uninterested in these stories, at last returns to the subject of the definition that Euthyphro had offered to him only to discard it abruptly, insisting that Euthyphro has failed to teach him the *idea* of the pious and must try again (6c8-6e10).

The Definition

In this section, the quest for a definition begins in earnest. In his attempt to define the pious, Euthyphro's first or primary response is as follows:

> I say, then, that the pious is just what I am doing now: to proceed against whoever does injustice regarding murders or thefts of sacred things, or is doing wrong in any other such thing, whether he happens to be a father or mother or anyone else at all; and not to proceed against him is impious. (5d8-e2)

Though Euthyphro seems to be on the verge, at first, of providing a mere example of the pious rather than the essence or defining characteristic of the class itself, he quickly broadens his focus and offers what can be easily formulated as an *idea*.[105] The pious means proceeding against unjust people or wrongdoers. Alternatively, the pious is the punitive enforcement (or maintenance) of justice understood as lawfulness. And he goes on to imply in the preface to his proof of this definition—his proof "that the law is so disposed … a proof that these things would be correctly (*orthos*) done if they take place in this way…"—that he sees no essential difference between the pious, the lawful, and the correct. The pious means the correct and lawful enforcement of (justice or) the law.[106]

This definition of the pious is immediately plausible. For it is clear that the vast majority of gods have been in some sense lawgiving gods; or, more broadly, that divinity is

[105] Here I agree with Versenyi 1982, 49: "Euthyphro's 'definition' is in fact not as bad as some others we find in the early dialogues."

[106] Once again, the (same) law would seem to operate on two levels at once. The lax law demands ordinary lawfulness or an abstention from injustice, while the strict or 'higher' law demands the enforcement of the lax law. That is, the law (taken as a whole) demands its own enforcement.

almost inevitably connected in some way with justice.[107] Just (or lawgiving) gods may desire of human beings not merely obedience to the just (or the lawful) but also the enforcement of justice (or the maintenance of the law). The gods' apparent failure to enforce the just on their own may be intended as a signal to us that, on account of either an incapacity to enforce justice in this world or a desire that human beings practice or imitate such (divine) virtues ourselves, they would prefer us to take on this role.[108]

The plausibility of this definition of the pious is also indicated by Plato himself.[109] For he has chosen to make the Platonic representative of piety a man who is fiery, not to say wild, with moral fervor—specifically, punitive fervor. In other words, the subject of the Platonic dialogue on piety—the ostensible purpose of which is to provide a means for Socrates to escape from his punishment by the city—is the education provided to or by a prophet who wishes to punish. For (the pious or) the just, the selfless desire to punish the unjust appears, in this dialogue, stronger and more immediate than any selfish desire for reward.

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[107] Cf. Hesiod *Works and Days* 238-270, Guthrie 1955, 143, Burkert 1985, 130, Deuteronomy 10:18, Isaiah 30:18, Micah 6:8, Psalm 37:27, Luke 10:10-13, 1 Corinthians 6:9, *Bhagavad Gita* 4.8, *Quran* 16:90, 5:8, 6:115.

[108] If the (divine) law demands its own enforcement (by human beings), one must wonder whether the enforcers of the law can expect for the 'higher' law to be sanctioned (that is, whether they can expect some reward or protection for their efforts). If the higher law is not sanctioned either, if it too lacks enforcement, then one might wonder whether it can be called a law in the strict sense; that is, whether a law demanding its own enforcement is not a contradiction in terms. Perhaps the human enforcers of the law or of justice more broadly hope, through their very efforts, to create a cosmos that becomes sufficiently just or lawful (on its own) that they themselves may subsequently be protected by it. Compare Xenophon *Cyr.* VII.1.18 and VII.2.6; Shakespeare *King Lear* IV.1.

[109] See Pangle 1976, 1062 fn. 11, as well as 1060: "The Athenian [Stranger] gives his defense of 'civil religion' near the end of his elaboration of the penal code—a rather odd place, it may seem at first sight, for Plato's most extensive treatment of theology."

The Proof

But Euthyphro is not satisfied with providing a mere definition of the pious. He asks Socrates, by name, to "contemplate how great a proof I will tell you that the law is so disposed—a proof, which I have already told to others as well" (5e2-4). That Euthyphro feels a need to *prove* that his action is correct—and to prove it by means of what turns out to be an argument based on his action's participation in (or analogy to other actions in) a rationally intelligible category—may have some bearing on our earlier discussion of the fairness of the method of procedure adopted by Socrates in the dialogue. It is possible, of course, that Euthyphro feels this need on account of simple prudence. The just may require an atmosphere protective of virtue in order to practice their virtue (see Aristophanes' *Clouds* 1083-1104). In order for Euthyphro to win his case, in order for justice to prevail, something of a propaganda campaign may be required. Perhaps he is simply offering a reasoned rhetorical account of the rightness of an action that he knows, deep in his heart, to be right independent of the strength or weakness of any reasoned argument.

But his enthusiasm in providing this argument to Socrates, of all people—whose apparent impotence even to protect himself against the city would make him a poor choice as an ally in convincing it to support Euthyphro—suggests otherwise. Euthyphro goes on to explain, though not in fancy philosophic language, how his action either participates in a rationally intelligible category or is analogous to other actions which implicitly form a coherent class (5e5-6a4). He employs, and describes his previous employment of, the

principle of non-contradiction in order to disprove the opinions of others (6a5-6).[110] Perhaps, then, the turf of piety and the turf of philosophy are not so different.

To demonstrate that the prosecution or punishment of his father is a pious (that is, lawful and correct) act, Euthyphro offers a simple proof: the gods do it. Therefore, people contradict themselves in getting angry at Euthyphro (6a3-6). In other words, they presumably contradict themselves in thinking of his action as impious or incorrect. But this "proof" is bewildering. Zeus and Kronos may well have punished their fathers; yet how does that fact, bare and simple, in any way prove that it is pious for *men* to punish *their* fathers? The ways of the gods may not be our ways. The gods, after all, are not pious.[111]

It is apparent that some middle term, some implicit thesis connecting the two claims—"the gods punish their fathers" and "it is pious for men to punish their fathers"—has gone unsaid here. But what is that middle term?

The most obvious candidate, of course, is the following: "the pious means the imitation of the gods."[112] Therefore any divine action may be taken as an implicit recommendation for emulation by human beings. Piety means trying to be like the divine. But this is a hubristic, not to say impious, attitude.[113] Should Euthyphro hold this to be the case—should he hold piety to consist in an effort to imitate the gods—then his deviance from Athenian tradition is far more radical than we have supposed. He is an anomaly.

And yet he does not present himself, in this particular section, as any kind of anomaly. To the contrary: he has already offered this proof "to others as well," as if expecting it to get traction with them. And he claims that all human beings, given the beliefs

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[110] See Versenyi 1982, 51.
[111] Strauss 1996, 14.
[112] See Strauss 1996, 13-16, Lewis 1985, 254-255 and 45-46, McPherran 1985, 115-116, and Burns 1985, 315.
[113] It may also be the Socratic attitude. See *Laws* 716c-e, *Min.* 318e-319a, *Tht.* 176a-c.

that they themselves hold, must not get angry with him lest they contradict themselves—as if they themselves share every premise of the argument that he has set forth. And yet most human beings have never claimed, as Euthyphro must be aware, that piety means imitating the gods.

We are plunged by the "imitation theory"—that is, by the claim that the middle term or implicit thesis in Euthyphro's argument is that "the pious is the imitation of the gods"—into an additional difficulty. For that theory would make Euthyphro's proof implicitly expand or alter the definition of piety that he has just offered. In defining the pious, as we have seen, he implied that the pious is the punitively just. But this proof, if it hinges on a definition of the pious as the imitation of the gods, in fact undermines the very definition it is intended to prove, by expanding it: the pious requires not merely justice or punitive justice, but the general imitation of the gods. But how could this stand as a proof of the first definition if it greatly alters that definition?

If the imitation theory has too many problems, if it ensnares Euthyphro in unnecessary contradictions, then perhaps we can posit another middle link between "the gods punish their fathers" and "it is pious for men to punish their fathers." For the implicit endorsement of the emulation of the gods is made only in conjunction with an explicit claim that Zeus is the "best and most just" of the gods (5e5-6a1). Perhaps, then, Zeus is emulated only insofar as he is just, only insofar as his actions live up to, or reveal themselves to be beholden to, a certain standard.[114] Perhaps the middle link, then, is as follows: "the gods are just; and the pious (for human beings) is the just."[115]

[114] Here I am in partial agreement with McPherran, who claims that Euthyphro's unorthodox theology includes a presupposition that "there is but one canon of virtue *for both gods and human beings*," and that Socrates' passing over this presupposition in "utter silence" helps to indicate that "he too thinks of piety as a universal, unitary, and univocal concept/property"

According to this theory, the gods are beholden to a standard or *idea* of the just. Human beings are to imitate the gods not as an end in itself (and not as the meaning of the pious) but only insofar as the gods are guides to the just. And at least two pieces of evidence speak in favor of this theory. First, Euthyphro modifies the behavior of the Hesiodic gods to meet the standard of justice. He makes Zeus' motive in binding Kronos the latter's injustice, though Zeus makes no such claim in the *Theogony*. Second, he outright ignores certain aspects of the gods' behavior as guides to human life. For instance, he never suggests that, piety being an imitation of the gods, he is justified in castrating his own father, as Kronos did. Rather, he imitates only the actions of the gods which align with a pre-existing standard or *idea* of justice and ignores the others. In accordance with that intelligible *idea* of justice, certain parts of the revealed (sacred) texts may with confidence be muted, modified, excised, or ignored. For the content of those texts, indeed the gods themselves, must bow to the standard of justice. The pious, then, is the just, and the gods are beholden to justice.[116]

(1996, 37). I am skeptical only of the claim that, in Socrates' understanding, the virtue shared by both gods and men ought to be called "piety."

[115] In what Euthyphro goes on to say, it becomes apparent that he (or a part of him) believes that it is part of the essential nature of a god to be just. For he claims that human beings "contradict themselves both concerning the gods and concerning me." He puts 'gods' in the plural, thus including (at least) Kronos in addition to Zeus. Human beings seem to contradict themselves by: (1) being angry at Euthyphro, and (2) believing that the gods punish their fathers. But this would only be a contradiction under two conditions: (1) anger, though not itself an opinion, necessarily implies a claim of injustice; and (2) the gods are by their very essence just. For nothing in the preceding account necessitates that "human beings themselves" believe that Kronos is just, except the fact that he is a god. Though Euthyphro presents Kronos as castrating his father for "other such things," which in the context presumably means unjust things, this in itself does not necessitate that human beings agree that the punishment fit the crime and was therefore just. See Milton *Paradise Lost* IX.691-705.

[116] See Lewis 1985, 255: "The standard must exist independently of Zeus' will, or else the affirmation of his superior justice is meaningless. For if justice is whatever Zeus wills it to be, the people who praise him as most just say in effect that he is the Zeusest of the gods."

The Digression

If Euthyphro has begun to provide hints that in his view the gods are beholden to an *idea* of justice, in accordance with which the revealed accounts of their actions (and perhaps even their commands) must be modified or even disregarded, one would expect Socrates to jump at the chance to investigate those hints. But he does not. Instead, he begins a lengthy digression, over the course of which he expresses a kind of dumbstruck incredulity regarding the traditional stories about the gods, which he finds "annoying." Socrates thus admits that he is in fact guilty of impiety.[117] Indeed, he stresses that the stories in question, for which he can muster at best a gloomy agnosticism (6a10-b3), are stories "spoken of by the poets and with which our sacred things have been adorned by the good painters, particularly the robe filled with such adornments which is brought up to the Acropolis in the Great Panathenaea," the most sacred of all Athenian festivals.[118] He is especially dubious with regard to the stories of strife between the gods (6b7-9, compare *Republic* 377e6-379c7). Do they really fight, he asks Euthyphro, and devour and castrate one another? Incredulous, he makes Euthyphro swear by Friendship (an epithet of Zeus) that the gods are in strife with each other (6b3-4).[119]

By indicating his own deviation from the tradition, Socrates at the same time emphasizes Euthyphro's traditionalism, his failure to deviate. By punctuating his incredulous

[117] This admission was foreshadowed by his earlier judgment that Meletus "discerns me so sharply and easily that he has indicted me for impiety" (5c6-8). See also Burnet 1954, 6: "Plato never attempts to conceal the fact that Socrates rejected traditional polytheistic mythology, and he makes it perfectly clear in this very dialogue (6a6 sqq.)."

[118] Compare Ranasinghe 2012, 49.

[119] Accordingly, friendship would seem to be a divine good, and a divine good which the gods lack. But the gods can lack nothing either good or divine. To resolve this contradiction, we may say that friendship is perhaps an equivocal good. For in many cases strife, according to the common view, is of (or enables) greater dignity or nobility than friendship (see the disagreement at *Laws* 626b5-629a3).

account with two pointed questions—"do you truly hold that these things have happened in this way?" and "shall we assert that these things are true, Euthyphro?"—he puts the prophet on the defensive. Although Euthyphro answers both of these questions in the affirmative, he attempts each time to distance himself from the views of the vulgar many. For there are also "things more wondrous than these, which the many do not know" (6b5-6). When this lure floats past, entirely ignored by Socrates, Euthyphro casts out a second one: "as I said just now, I will also explain many other things to you, if you wish, about the divine things; and when you hear them, I know well that you will be astounded" (6c5-7). But Socrates has no interest in hearing such things. The philosopher can find no foothold, no leverage by which to (prove or) disprove revealed accounts of divine behavior. He must concede the truth of such tales to men who experience them as true. Or rather, he must concede their possible truth while attempting to relocate the disagreement to his own turf, the turf of the intelligible *ideas*.[120] Should the pious man avoid that relocation, the philosopher will be forced to defer to revelation. As Socrates puts it: "if these things seem so to you too, who know well about such things, it is certainly necessary, as is likely, for us to concede them as well. For what else can we say, since we ourselves also agree that we know nothing about them?" (6a10-b3). This is a remarkable concession. It would seem that Socrates, the representative of philosophy, is not interested in trying to debunk the traditional tales about the activities and existence of the gods. Rather, he seems to turn his focus elsewhere: to the question of what guidance the gods provide for human life.

[120] In the *Phaedrus* (229c-230a), Socrates says that he turns from the analysis or rationalization of the traditional tales toward a quest for self-knowledge; that is, toward a quest to know whether or not he himself is a monster. That quest—to foreshadow an argument I will make in the conclusion of this dissertation—might be facilitated by the activity of dialectics, if dialectics enables Socrates to test whether his own experience of revelation, or the alteration of that experience that was produced in him by philosophic reflection, is wholly anomalous.

The Discarding

Abruptly, Socrates ends his digression about the traditional stories and returns to the subject of the pious itself. He claims that in offering the first definition, Euthyphro did not succeed in teaching him the pious. "Instead, you told me that what you are doing now, proceeding against your father for murder, happens to be pious … But in fact, Euthyphro, you also say that many other things are pious" (6d1-7). The first definition, it would seem, has failed abysmally. It offered merely a single example of the pious, instead of the essence or defining characteristic of a general class. Back to the drawing board for Euthyphro.

But this is, of course, unfair. Euthyphro did not merely say that his own action, the action of prosecuting his father, was pious. He offered, instead, something very close to an *idea*, implying that the pious was the punitively just or the (lawful) enforcement of the law. But Socrates chooses to consider only the narrowest possible interpretation of Euthyphro's definition, ignoring most of it, in order to discard it on that basis. The primary function of the exasperated digression, it now appears, was to make Euthyphro (and the reader) forget the better part of Euthyphro's definition so as to enable Socrates' unfair discarding of it. That definition was phrased, of course, with a certain imprecision. But in the rest of the dialogue, Socrates will repeatedly come to the aid of Euthyphro—three times altogether—in formulating or reformulating a definition of the pious (at 7a7-10, 9c9-d6, and 11e2-5). He offers no such assistance here. Instead he hoodwinks Euthyphro, having distracted him with a brash digression so as to dump his definition of the pious, unfairly, in the trash. The puzzle we are left with at the conclusion of this section, then, is this: why doesn't Socrates want to address Euthyphro's primary definition of the pious?

Definition Two: The Pious as the Dear to the Gods (6e11-11b1)

At this point in the dialogue, we shift from the introduction and discarding of the first definition (of the pious) to the introduction and testing of a second one. This section can be divided into seven subsections.

First, Euthyphro presents his new definition, which he articulates as follows: "what is dear to the gods is pious, and what is not dear is impious." Socrates responds to this definition with high praise (6e11-7a6). Next, Socrates makes an apparently minor modification of the definition, a modification that receives the witting or unwitting approval of Euthyphro (7a7-7b1). Then, by way of criticizing the adequacy of the definition, Socrates questions Euthyphro with regard to the quarrels of the gods. If the gods, like human beings, quarrel over the noble, the good, and the just things, and if they hold these things to be dear, do they not necessarily differ with regard to what is dear? And if the same things can be both dear to some gods and hated by other gods, then how can the pious (understood as what is dear to the gods) have one unified and self-similar *idea* (7b2-8b6)? In response to this challenge, Euthyphro attempts to emend the preceding discussion—the gods, he says, agree on at least *one* thing: that the unjust killer must pay the penalty. But this emendation is rejected by Socrates as unhelpful (8b7-8e10). Abruptly, Socrates issues a stark challenge: Euthyphro must prove that all of the gods hold that his prosecution of his father is correct; Euthyphro demurs (9a1-b11). Letting him off the hook, Socrates makes a further modification of the definition, a modification rephrased by Euthyphro as: "the pious is whatever all the gods love, and the opposite, whatever all the gods hate, is impious." Euthyphro considers this definition noble, but he agrees to test it (9b12-9e9). Finally,

Socrates investigates which has priority to the other: divine love or the unchanging *ideas* (10a1-11b1).

The Puzzle (and the Framing of the Dialogue) Revisited

At the conclusion of the previous section of the dialogue, we were left with a puzzle. Why did Socrates rephrase and discard, inaccurately and unfairly, Euthyphro's first definition of the pious? And that puzzle only intensifies here. For Socrates praises to the skies the new definition of the pious (as the dear to the gods), calling it "altogether noble" (7a2). The adjective translated as "altogether noble," *pagkalos*, occurs only one other time in the dialogue. In that instance, it is attributed to the works of the gods themselves (13e11-13).[121] Euthyphro's answer is so noble it is akin to the productions of the gods. But Socrates continues: "You have now answered just as I was seeking for you to answer," he says (7a2-3). Apparently he had hoped to hear this definition all along. He all but vouches, moreover, for Euthyphro's ability to teach him its accuracy: "Whether it is true, however, I don't yet know. But clearly you will go on to teach me that what you say is true" (7a3-5). And when Euthyphro's attempts to defend his definition subsequently falter, Socrates lets him out of his difficulties and provides him with assistance by means of a reformulation (9c8-d6). This reaction by Socrates, taken as a whole (the praise, the endorsement, the eagerness to become a pupil, the assistance) must be seen in the light of his earlier reaction to the first definition (an annoyed digression and an unfair discarding), to which it forms a most vivid contrast.

[121] It is also the word attributed to the opposition, on the part of Socrates' daimonion, to his engaging in politics (Plato *Ap.* 31d6). To consider an example with a more immediate relevance to the *Euthyphro*, Diotima tells Socrates in the *Symposium* that it is probably on account of his conflation of the beloved thing (*eromenon*) with the god Eros that he considers the latter *pagkalos* (204c1-6).

The question of the previous section, then, has become all the more pressing. That question must be modified to incorporate the contrast that has now been revealed. Its modified version would be: Why does Socrates prefer with such passion to confront *this* definition of the pious rather than the definition that was first or primary?

A clue to the answer may be found in the language that Socrates uses here. For he says that Euthyphro will "teach him" that this new definition is correct. And what a person can teach, he presumably knows. What does Euthyphro know or claim to know? Previously, after describing the murder of the day-laborer, he had implied that he, unlike his relatives, possessed knowledge of "how the divine is disposed concerning the pious and the impious" (4e1-3).[122] This must be taken to mean one of two things. (1) Euthyphro, unlike all or most other human beings, knows the surprising ways in which the divine is disposed toward the known and fixed categories of the pious and impious. For instance, the gods occasionally dislike what is pious and love what is impious. This option seems unlikely. Or (2) It is important to mention the way that the gods are disposed not because they are disposed in some surprising way toward known and fixed categories, but because divine disposition or affection itself has some role in determining the *content* of those categories. What the gods hold dear is (made) pious, and what they hate is (made) impious. And yet, in the same breath with which he implied, then, that correct behavior was determined merely by the disposition of the gods, Euthyphro took care also to mention the categories of the pious and the impious—as if they preceded the disposition of the gods toward them, or as if the disposition of the gods were not altogether dispositive. His initial claim to knowledge, then, revealed a profound ambivalence as to the meaning of the pious. That is, he understood the pious *both* as a category whose content was determined by the dispositions or affections of

[122] More literally: "the divine, how it holds concerning the pious and the impious."

the gods, *and* as a category with a fixed content independent of divine disposition or affection. He seemed, moreover, to be unaware of any seam or disharmony within his understanding.

Upon hearing this definition, Socrates had immediately pried it apart; that is, he had separated its two components in order to provide some clarity.[123] He did so by asking Euthyphro whether he had "such precise knowledge about how the divine things are disposed, and the pious and impious things" (4e4-6). Euthyphro confirmed that he did. And the effort to pry apart the two components of Euthyphro's knowledge did not stop there. For as we are now in a position to see, the two definitions of the pious that have emerged (the pious as the punitively just, and the pious as the dear to the gods) bear witness to the successful attempt, on the part of Socrates, to pry apart Euthyphro's knowledge in a more systematic way. The first definition gives the pious some fixed and predictable content, whereas the content of the class as defined in the second manner is unpredictable. For the gods could change their dispositions radically and unpredictably at any moment. The unjust, for instance, could become pious, and the just impious. The puzzle or question with which we are concerned, then, must be modified still further: Why does Socrates prefer with such passion to confront the second definition, according to which the pious is determined solely by the affection, will, or whim of the gods, rather than the first definition, which offered more stability?

Before we attempt to provide an answer, we must explore the question more fully. For that question grows all the more puzzling in the light of a further observation. If the pious is an *idea*, that *idea* is very likely—given what Euthyphro has said in both his presentation and his proof of the first definition—equivalent or very similar to the *idea* of the

[123] See Bruell 1999, 120-121.

just.[124] This would mean that the just, if it is a fixed and intelligible class, has some priority to the divine as such—that is, some priority to the gods—in determining what is pious. But this sounds quite akin to a thesis that we have already encountered in the dialogue. Indeed it was Socrates *himself*, in his discussion of the indictment and the motives of Meletus, who implied that concerns about justice had some kind of priority to concerns about the gods as such. This was what we called "the initial Socratic thesis." But if we were correct then—in claiming that Socrates believed the just to be in some way prior to or more fundamental than the divine—then why would Socrates now go out of his way to *discard* a definition of the pious that makes it equivalent or quite akin to the just, in favor of examining a definition of the pious according to which its content is determined solely by the dispositions of the (willful) gods?

Perhaps Socrates wants to test whether opinions about justice, or moral considerations in general, can be *removed* from the experience of piety, while leaving that experience intact. He may suspect that they cannot; that is, he may suspect that moral opinions are a necessary component or condition of pious experience. But he may want to test his own thesis by attempting to refute it. In other words, he may want to test whether Euthyphro can, if prodded toward it, be satisfied with a belief in gods who do not necessarily respect and command what is just, but rather command actions in accordance with their own inscrutable wills. Such gods, untethered from the *idea* of justice, would be unpredictable. They might require not justice, understood as a virtue of service to the common good, or nobility, understood as a virtue of devotion to what is of higher dignity than oneself, but only the performance of strange, particular rituals. In that case, philosophers, who attempt to live by the light of unassisted reason, would be vulnerable to

[124] See *Protagoras* 331b, where Socrates claims that "either justice is the same thing as piety or it is as similar as possible."

divine punishment for failing to abide by those requirements. The philosophic life, in that case, far from being the best life available to human beings, would likely turn out to be bad, no matter what virtues a philosopher might claim to know or embody. Euthyphro, for his part, has already shown evidence of an attachment to justice and nobility. But does he consider the gods to require especially, or necessarily, those virtues? Perhaps he can conceive of the gods as beings who require only attributes and actions that are unrelated to morality. To what extent are his opinions about justice and nobility connected with, or essential to, his piety? It is to that question that we now turn.

The Modification and the Problem of Law

Although he praises highly Euthyphro's new definition of the pious, Socrates at once modifies it. Euthyphro had said that "what is dear to the gods is pious, and what is not dear is impious" (6e11-7a1). But in Socrates' supposed reiteration, this definition changes: "Come then, let us consider what we are saying. The thing dear-to-the-gods and human being dear-to-the-gods are pious, while the thing hateful-to-the-gods and he who is hateful-to-the-gods are impious. The pious is not the same as the impious, but most opposite. Isn't this so?" (7a7-10). And Euthyphro agrees.

What is the effect of Socrates' reiteration? Most importantly, he has changed the definition of the impious from the 'non-dear' to the 'hateful.' The effect of this change is to create what we may call a "neutral region" between virtue (piety) and vice (impiety). If one imagines a spectrum ranging from the most horrible vice to the most splendid virtue, the neutral region would represent a swath of actions (or non-actions) considered neither virtuous nor vicious, either because they are evidence only of mediocrity or because they are

non-moral.[125] Euthyphro's initial definition, of course, had included nothing of the sort: every action was either dear to the gods (and thus pious) or not dear (and thus impious). But if there are things that the gods neither hate nor love, as we must assume that there are, then Socrates has introduced a neutral region and altered, perhaps drastically, Euthyphro's definition.

The question, then, is the following: if the effect of this modification is so important, why doesn't Euthyphro notice it? He seems to consider the two definitions equivalent. Indeed, he is led to go out of his way to confirm that, in his view, they are (7b1, reading *eirētai gar* with the manuscripts). Is he merely dense, or can some sense be made of his conflation of the two definitions, and of Plato's presentation of it?

It may be useful here to remind ourselves of Euthyphro's earlier confusion about the demands of law. Euthyphro believed that the law, as it came to light in his discussion of impartial justice and pollution, was simultaneously strict and lax. According to the strict law, his prosecution of his father (or, more broadly, the deviation from the city which that prosecution epitomized) was obligatory. His deviation was thus, given the threat of the sanction of the law (pollution), necessarily good for him. According to the lax law, however, his prosecution or deviation was non-obligatory. That prosecution or deviation would receive no special favor from the law, and was very likely a sacrifice—of his father's interest, and of a normal and acceptable life. And indeed Euthyphro proved to be uncertain, in the wake of his confused lesson on the law, as to whether his deviation was beneficial to him or not (4e9-5a2). To clarify, then, whether the law was lax or strict would be to clarify whether his action or deviation was good or bad for him. But Euthyphro proved to be unwilling or

[125] See Book I of the *Laws*, where the Athenian Stranger portrays human beings as puppets pulled by passions, struggling in the region "where virtue and vice lie separated from one another" (644d9-e4). See also 878b, 881b-c, 914a, and 921d-e.

unable to make such a clarification. Therefore the status of his noble action or deviation was left in a kind of haze, simultaneously good for him and bad for him.

Perhaps there is a connection between that prior confusion, as to whether the law was lax or strict, and the question that is before us now, the question of a neutral region. That there could be such a connection is suggested by the observation that, if we envision the spectrum from vice to virtue, the lax law would be positioned at the lower bound of the neutral region, while the strict law would be positioned at its upper bound. But what could the connection be?

To address that question, we must consider with greater precision the motive or motives for Euthyphro's wavering between the lax law and the strict law. Why does Euthyphro desire to understand the (one) law as, in some way, hazily dual? It seems likely, upon consideration, that the desire at the root of his wavering must be—apart from his desire to understand his own deviation as noble—the desire for justice. For either law, taken singly—either the lax law taken in isolation from the strict law, or the strict law taken in isolation from the lax law—is unjust. The lax law is unjust to the exceptional: it lumps them, despite their extraordinary virtue, with the mediocre. And the strict law is unjust to the mediocre: it lumps them, despite their lack of vice, with the vicious.

Euthyphro had defined the pious as the dear to the gods, and the impious as the non-dear. But as Socrates implies in his response, only a reformulation—that is, only the introduction of a neutral region—can make the pious (virtue) and the impious (vice) "most opposite" to each other (7a9-10). A single law (whether lax or strict) can never succeed in making virtue and vice most opposite, as the *ideas* of the pious and the impious have been agreed to be. For according to the lax law, vice is somehow the opposite of both virtue and mediocrity (considered as virtue). Thus the class of the impious, for instance, reveals itself to

be not truly opposite to the class of the pious taken as a whole, but only to a part of it. And according to the strict law, virtue is somehow the opposite of both vice and mediocrity (considered as vice). Thus the class of the pious, for instance, reveals itself to be not truly opposite to the class of the impious taken as a whole, but only to a part of it.

So why not embrace the idea of a neutral region? That idea solves, and solves coherently, what law can only solve through an incoherent wavering (between lax and strict) or a hidden duality. The neutral region creates outcomes that are just, and it makes virtue and vice truly opposite to each other. So why not leave behind the old incoherence?

The answer must lie, we are forced to conclude, in Euthyphro's attachment to law and lawfulness. For the introduction of a "neutral region" is not merely a modification or a purification of law but rather a transcendence of it. Law is, in its essence, dichotomous. It provides simple and clear guidance as to what should or should not be done. But the idea of a neutral region implies not a dichotomy but a trichotomy. It introduces leeway and choice: one is free to choose whether to be virtuous or merely non-vicious. The clarity, the confidence, and the security of a lawful mentality are somewhat diminished.

Yet that clarity would come, as we have seen, at a cost. We can express the difficulty of law in another way. Virtue exists on a spectrum. There can be more virtue or less virtue. Therefore the rewards and punishments that are deserved, which are allotted in response to virtue and vice, will also exist on a spectrum. But law is dichotomous. The transition from spectral virtue or spectral desert, then, to lawful virtue or lawful desert will be difficult. Yet law is, in its essence, just.

To address this tension within itself,[126] then, the law must become hazily dual in order to create the illusion, or even the effectual reality, of a neutral region. The lax law, when employed, ensures that the mediocre are not unjustly punished for their mediocrity. The strict law, when employed, ensures that the exceptionally virtuous are justly rewarded for their virtue. But this effectual solution can be taken as an admission of a theoretical problem or insufficiency. For it is an admission that the introduction of a neutral region or trichotomy would be more just. Of course, if virtue and just desert exist by their nature on a spectrum, we may wonder: why should the desire for justice be satisfied with even a trichotomy? Such a dissatisfaction and its apparently endless demands must be bounded, it would seem, by the competing demand for clear, categorical, and realistic guidance for human action. This latter demand is especially evident or acute in political life. The law or a lawful mentality, then, must in the final analysis be somehow embraced.

We may now return to the question of Euthyphro's psychology. In failing to recognize the effect of Socrates' reformulation—or rather, in failing to recognize a distinction between that reformulation and his own definition—Euthyphro showed himself to conflate a lawful mentality with a mentality that would admit of a neutral region. It was revealed in his previous statements that Euthyphro believes the law to be simultaneously lax and strict. Here, it is revealed that his belief in the duality of law is, in effect, an indication that Euthyphro simultaneously believes in law and does not. For the earlier conflation (of lax law with strict law) exists in order to enable the current conflation (of the lawful view with the view that makes room for a neutral region). The tension within law—that it must be both dichotomous and just—gives rise to a desire to move away from law. But Euthyphro is saved from moving toward the idea of a neutral region—or rather, he is able to recognize

[126] And if one definition of the just is the lawful, a similar tension will exist within justice as well.

and incorporate the trichotomy implicit in the idea of a neutral region—by means of the wavering buried within his understanding of the law.

Having introduced the neutral region, Socrates subsequently widens it, or leads Euthyphro to widen it, to a potentially vast extent: only what *all* the gods hate is impious; whatever some gods love and other gods hate may indeed be neither pious nor impious (9d2-5). This requirement, that a thing or a person cannot be impious in the absence of divine unanimity (in hatred), is perhaps meant to calm the wild Euthyphro, to mitigate the confidence of his punitive fervor. While Plato points us, his readers, to the theoretical nuances of law or lawfulness, Socrates makes use of those nuances for a practical benefit.

Quarrels

But that further modification of the definition, the effect of which is to widen the neutral region, requires first, for its justification, a discussion of quarrels among the gods. That discussion may be summarized as follows. Socrates reminds Euthyphro that the gods are said to quarrel and become enemies (7b2-4, compare 6b7-c7). Quarrels among human beings arise not on account of what is manifestly quantifiable—things like number, magnitude, or weight—but rather on account of the moral matters, or rather the questions of 'value': "the just and the unjust, and noble and shameful, and good and bad" (7c10-d6). It is over these things, and these things alone, that we become "enemies and angry at each other." Socrates presents this as a universal fact, common to all human beings (7d5-6). It is agreed, moreover, that if the gods quarrel they would necessarily quarrel over the same things. But in that case, any quarreling that occurs among the gods will indicate a disagreement over what is just, noble, and good. But the gods love (hold dear) "whatever

they believe to be noble and good and just, and they hate the opposites of these" (7e6-9).[127] In that case—since it has been agreed that the gods quarrel about the just, noble, and good things—the gods must quarrel over the dear. But the same things, then, are both dear to (some) gods and hateful to (other) gods; therefore some things are both pious and impious; therefore Euthyphro's definition has failed to discover the (discrete and self-similar) *idea* of the pious.

This logical proof, though ingenious, presents us with a puzzle. For why is the proof, in its entirety, necessary? If Socrates' aim here is to prove that, given the existence of warring gods, the pious (or dear to the gods) will also be impious (or hateful to the gods), why did he need to mention the noble, the good, and the just? Could he not have skipped this lengthy digression in a single step? That step would consist in the following question: "Don't we (and the gods) quarrel over things that are dear to us, rather than things to which we are indifferent?" Having obtained Euthyphro's assent, Socrates could then have arrived at a conclusion identical to the one he arrives at here: the quarreling of the gods ought to be taken as evidence of a disagreement over what is dear; therefore the same things are both pious (dear) and impious (hateful).

Moreover, the proof may not be entirely accurate. For the proof includes the assertion that quarrels result always and only from disagreements over the just, noble, and good things. Does every quarrel over the good things imply a deeper disagreement about the just (or the noble) things? Almost all of them surely do—but do all of them? Could there not be a situation of scarcity in which two self-interested people became "enemies and angry" with each other, not due to any disagreement over what was good (or just), but precisely

[127] The re-ordering of the three terms is noted by Bruell (1999, 130). The movement of the just from the first position (in the case of quarreling) to the last position (in the case of love) may indicate that, although we quarrel primarily over the just, we love it less than the noble and the good.

because they *agreed* on what was good or dear (the last remaining life-vest on a sinking ship, for instance)?[128] Indeed, to raise a somewhat similar objection, some quarrels appear to concern *neither* the just *nor* the good. The love of one's own, for instance, can at times lead to a spirited and even violent defense of one's own (especially of one's own dignity) simply *as* one's own, without any evident claim about the good, the noble, or the just.[129]

If we accept these objections—that the proof is unnecessary, and that one step of the proof may be inaccurate—we are led to the conclusion that Socrates here 'moralizes' the question of quarrels unnecessarily. But why does he do so? His decision to do so is especially puzzling in the light of what we said earlier, that his goal in this section of the dialogue may be to calm the punitive fervor of Euthyphro. It can hardly be useful to achieving such a goal, of course, to persuade Euthyphro that all disagreements are disagreements over morality (an act which may indeed take its effect: see 8c3-6). So why moralize the question—especially if Euthyphro needs, given his wild deviation, to be somewhat de-moralized?

We must admit the possibility, with these difficulties in mind, that Socrates' motive in this section is more complex than we earlier claimed. Perhaps he is doing far more than attempting to calm a zealous diviner. But to explain what his motive might be, we must revisit the substance of the 'digression' into the moral questions. For if we can discover a different or a deeper motive on the part of Socrates, it may prove to be not a digression at all; it may prove to be the heart of the matter.

The pivotal moment of the digression seems to be the following question: don't the gods each "love what they believe noble and good and just, and hate the opposites of these?" Euthyphro immediately confirms that this is the case (7e6-9). But by asking this

[128] See Strauss 1996, 11.
[129] One might respond that the love of one's own in fact always implies or presupposes an opinion that one's own is good (see the disagreement at *Symp.* 191a-d and 205e-206a), just, or noble.

question and receiving this response, Socrates effectively tethers the dispositions of the gods back to *ideas*—or rather to the *ideas* as the gods happen to understand them. The asking of the question, and the digression which makes it necessary or possible, may thus be taken as part of a broader effort, on the part of Socrates, to test whether Euthyphro can stick with his new, amoral definition of piety (as the dear to the gods). If we grant that the gods quarrel, and that quarrels must be taken as indicative of disagreements over moral matters, then we can conclude that—whether on account of an error in judgment or of some other cause—some of the gods must diverge from a strict allegiance or obedience to what is demanded by the *ideas*. Socrates perhaps wants to test Euthyphro's reaction upon being made aware of that divergence. Will he stick with the dispositions (or the stories) of the traditional gods? Or will he break ranks with them, and side rather with the *ideas*—or, similarly, use the *ideas* as a standard by which to judge the gods?

Yet this test, however promising, fails. For Euthyphro throws it off track by assuring Socrates (in what follows) that, in the crucial case, the gods, being in perfect agreement, in no way diverge from the single *idea* of justice.

Euthyphro's Attempted Emendation

As Socrates wraps up his proof that the pious (if it is defined as the dear) is also the impious, Euthyphro interjects. He is dissatisfied with the preceding discussion and its deduction that the gods must differ over the *ideas*. In what is perhaps the high point of his engagement in the conversation, he remarks: "But I suppose, Socrates, that none of the gods differ one with another about this, at least: that whoever kills someone unjustly must pay the penalty" (8b7-9). He points, then, to a dependable alignment between the gods and the *ideas*.

But Socrates does not find this interjection helpful. For as he leads Euthyphro to admit, *no one* differs with regard to the claim that Euthyphro has set forth. "For surely, you wondrous man, no god or human being dares to say that the doer of injustice ought not to pay the penalty" (8d11-e2). That the agreement to this claim is universal—the agreement to the claim that unjust killers, or unjust people in general, need to be punished—indicates that the statement is obvious, perhaps even tautological. It does not provide guidance as to what course of action is just in particular circumstances. According to this argument, even if the pious is the dear to the gods, and the gods hold the just to be dear, and they further agree that justice means punishing the unjust, we are still no closer to a discovery of what justice (and thus piety) is. We lack, in particular, an understanding of the criteria by which we may determine who is unjust, in order that we may seek them out and punish them. When Euthyphro argues against the universal agreement to (and inconsequentiality of) his claim by saying that, indeed, unjust people "both elsewhere and in the law courts … will do and say anything at all to escape the penalty," Socrates reminds him that they, too, agree that the unjust must pay the penalty. Even they, the unjust, "don't dare to dispute" the rightness of punishing the unjust. Instead, they argue "that they haven't done injustice" (8c10-d2). The unjust who flee their (just) punishments, then, are no exception to the rule of universal agreement.

But there is something fishy about Socrates' argument here. For he repeatedly speaks of what people "assert" (8c8), "claim in a dispute" (8c1, d4, e6-7), "dare to dispute by saying" (8c11), and "dare to say" (8e1). But the question is not what people dare to say, but rather what they "differ over" (8b8)—that is, what they *think*.[130] So is it not correct, after all, to make the objection (which Euthyphro makes, and which Socrates mutes) that criminals

[130] As noted by Versenyi 1982, 62.

show by their deeds (that is, by fleeing the just penalty) that they believe that the unjust need not pay the penalty? Whatever they may proclaim in public—especially, as anyone knows, in the law courts—is likely to be merely a rhetorical screen for their private thoughts. The fact that Socrates must cheat in the argument, then, sidestepping the issue of what people think and focusing merely on what they "dare to say" publically, indicates that Euthyphro is ultimately correct. There is not, after all, universal agreement that the unjust need to be punished, and Euthyphro's emendation of the preceding argument is genuinely helpful.

But why, then, does Socrates make such a bad argument? Or can the argument be salvaged in some way? Perhaps there is, after all, some validity to it. For do criminals who flee the (just) punishment for their crimes really believe themselves to be unjust in the moments at which they flee? Or is their activity of self-justification, in all likelihood, not merely aimed at convincing other people (with prudent rhetoric) but also or even primarily aimed at convincing themselves? Indeed, the claim that injustice ought to be punished may well be tautological. But if so, if injustice is something that needs to be punished, then perhaps those who flee the just punishment for their injustices do not in those moments understand, strictly speaking, that they have done injustice.

But this implies a deeper problem. For would not the prior argument apply to the unjust not only when they flee the penalties for their crimes, but also or especially in the moments when they commit them? If injustice is by its essence, properly understood, something which ought to be punished, which necessarily will be punished,[131] or which, more simply, is *bad*—then would not someone have to be insane (and thus pitiable) to commit injustice while seeing it clearly for what it is?[132] For no sane person desires what he

[131] Consider in this context the shifting or wavering between *dei* (8c2, 8d5) and *doteon* (8d1, e1). See also Plato *Hipparch.* 226b.
[132] See Plato *Ap.* 25c5-26a8 and *Laws* 860d1-e3.

understands to be bad for himself. But if the unjust do not commit injustice knowingly—that is, while understanding clearly its essential character—they do not act voluntarily. But in that case they do not deserve punishment, but rather pity and education. We have been led, then, simply by taking seriously the claim that injustice (tautologically) deserves punishment or harm, in the direction of precisely the opposite claim.

But that observation ought to remind us of something stranger still. For the latter claim—that the unjust do not after all deserve punishment or harm—is Socrates' own. That virtue is good, and that vice is ignorance, is a frequent refrain in the Socratic dialogues. And in Book I of the *Republic*, Socrates persuades Polemarchus that the unjust do not deserve punishment (harm) as a response to their injustice (335d). So the claim that the unjust deserve to be punished—far from being universally agreed upon, by all gods and men, as Socrates claims—is in fact denied by Socrates himself!

But how can we explain this contradiction? Why would Socrates mute his own thesis on injustice, ignorance, and punishment, to the point of loudly proclaiming its opposite, indeed proclaiming it as universally held or tautological? An answer, or at least a step toward an answer, may be provided by one or both of the following considerations. First, Socrates may speak differently to different interlocutors. Perhaps he has little faith in Euthyphro's ability to grasp or benefit from certain arguments, arguments he accordingly mutes or denies. Second, Socrates may find it not only more useful at the practical level, but also in a way more accurate at the theoretical level, to re-embrace the conventional understanding of justice despite its internal tensions. Perhaps he has concluded that the philosophic critique, whatever its merits, culminates in a version of justice sufficiently transformed as to necessitate the use of a different label, and perhaps he desires to avoid blurring the old

version with the new. Perhaps he often considers it best, then, when using the word justice, to maintain the ordinary meaning of the term.[133]

Socrates' Challenge

With the attempted emendation to the argument disposed of, Socrates issues an abrupt challenge. Can Euthyphro teach Socrates, so that he may become wiser,

> what your proof is that all the gods believe that that man died unjustly who while serving for hire became a murderer, and then, bound by the master of the man who died, met his end because of his bonds before the one who bound him found out from the exegetes what he should do about him; and that it is correct for a son to proceed against his father and denounce him for murder on behalf of someone of this sort. Come, try to show me in some way plainly about these things, that all gods believe more than anything that this action is correct. And if you show me sufficiently, I will never stop extolling you for your wisdom. (9a2-b4)

Euthyphro is called upon to prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the gods hold that in his particular case, with all of its unique specificity and ambiguity, it is correct for a son to proceed against and denounce his father.

But this challenge is, of course, comic—as is indicated by the confidence of Socrates' final promise to praise Euthyphro forever if he can meet it. Comic, too, is Euthyphro's fumbling response: it's a big task, but he could, of course, explain the proof clearly if he wanted to… No one could meet such a challenge, and Socrates knows it.

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[133] For a similar reason, I have reservations about interpretations which claim that the message of the *Euthyphro* is that "true piety" turns out to be "philosophy." Such claims appear to me to blur rather than to clarify the stakes of the dialogue. (See Blits 1980, 33, Lewis 1985, 246, Rabinowitz 1958, 118-120, Versenyi 1982, 83, Berry 1998, 263). In a general way, this problem is evident in much of the scholarship, which, rather than seeing the dialogue as an effort on the part of Socrates to understand the piety of his interlocutor, tends to impose Socratic ideas on Euthyphro's claims and to call the resulting amalgam true piety. (See Dimas 2006, 25-28, Hoerber 1958, 107, Versenyi 1982, 83-86 and 132-33).

But Socratic jokes tend to make a serious point.[134] The serious point of this particular joke is indicated by the repeated use of the word "correct" (*orthos*: 9a7, 9b2). As we have seen, Euthyphro associates the correct with the lawful (5e3-4). By its essence, the law provides clear and simple guidance for action. It makes general commands which are meant to be applicable in specific situations. The commands of the law must be general lest they multiply infinitely, losing their clarity and simplicity: a map must be less complex than the terrain it describes.[135] But the application of general (and static) commands to specific (and dynamic) situations is necessarily crude. Only an infinitely specific code of law, an impossible and useless code of law, could direct Euthyphro in the situation which happens to arise with his father and the hired hand. But that means that the law which does exist, for its part, will be of vague or uncertain application to his specific case and many others (see *Statesman* 294a10-b6). In Book Nine of Plato's *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger points to the relevance of this problem to the question of the rule of the gods (859a-861b).

The Priority of Divine Love or the Ideas

The initial test, at any rate, has failed. Socrates had sought to confront Euthyphro with a divergence between the *ideas* and the dispositions or affections of the gods. But Euthyphro had assured him that, in his particular case, there is in fact no such divergence. Presumably he could continue to assure Socrates of a convergence (between the *ideas* and the

[134] When joking, Socrates "was no less profitable to those who spent time with him than when he was serious" (Xenophon *Mem.* IV.1.1, cf. I.3.8).
[135] See Borges' *On Exactitude in Science*: "In time, those unconscionable maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it… In the deserts of the West, still today, there are tattered ruins of that map, inhabited by animals and beggars; in all the land there is no other relic of the disciplines of geography."

disposition of the gods) in any particular case that might be presented to him. A new approach to the question must be found. For the issue is not so much, after all, what convergence or divergence exists between the dispositions of the gods and the *ideas*, but rather which of the latter two has priority. For the sake of self-knowledge, a believer would have to be clear as to whether his allegiance was primarily to the gods, and only incidentally to the *ideas*, or rather primarily to the *ideas*, and only incidentally to the gods. More specifically—since Euthyphro has shown himself to associate the *idea* of the pious with the *idea* of the just—should a believer be, and is he, just on account of the gods' desire that he be just? Or is he just for its own sake, and only obedient to the gods insofar as they love or command what is just?

Socrates begins with a question: "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved?" (10a2-3). Euthyphro, perhaps because he blurs the two possibilities so completely, cannot understand the question. Therefore Socrates sets out to explain it more slowly. First, he establishes a distinction between subject and object. One thing carries, and another thing is carried. One thing leads, and another thing is led. One thing sees, and another thing is seen. One thing loves, and another thing is loved. Euthyphro agrees that the distinction is real in each of these cases (10a5-12).

Next, Socrates establishes that the quality of being-acted-upon is caused by the relevant action. A carried thing is a carried thing because it is carried. A led thing is a led thing because it is led. A seen thing is a seen thing because it is seen. And a loved thing is no different: it is a loved thing because it is loved. Euthyphro confirms that, in all of these cases, the action causes the quality or trait in question (10b1-c13).

Finally, Socrates brings in the pious. Is it loved by all of the gods? Euthyphro confirms that it is. The next question, however, is a complete non sequitur: Is it (the pious)

loved by the gods *because it is pious*? And Euthyphro agrees to this as well. But this response is not required by the argument. Indeed, it is so far from being required by the argument that it destroys the validity of the current definition of the pious as the dear to the gods (which is the same, in the Greek, as the god-dear or the god-loved). For the pious was supposed to be the god-loved. As such, it would belong to that class of traits that Socrates has just discussed, for which the action (of loving, for instance) causes the trait (of being loved, for instance). But now Euthyphro is claiming that, on the contrary, in the case of the pious, the trait (of being pious) causes the action (of love). The pious, then, is "loved because it is pious, rather than pious because it is loved" (10d6-7); the pious, therefore, is unlike the god-loved, which is god-loved because it is loved. For in the case of the pious, the trait (being pious) causes the action (love). In the case of the god-loved, on the other hand, the action (love) causes the trait (being god-loved). Therefore the two traits in question, the pious and the god-loved, must be different.

Euthyphro is thus ensnared in a contradiction. For he has claimed both that the essence of the pious is the god-loved (that is, that the pious is a trait caused *by* divine love) and that the essence of the pious is not the god-loved (that is, that the pious is rather a trait that *causes* divine love). And with the unveiling of this contradiction, the argument has in its essence concluded (at 10e9). What follows, though it is often mistaken for an essential piece of the argument, is only a reiteration of the same contradiction, displayed this time by means of a complicated substitution. What we must consider, before turning to that substitution, is the question of why the contradiction unveiled by the argument might be attractive, common, or indeed necessary for a man of Euthyphro's type. Why would he need to believe *both* that the gods cause the pious to be pious by loving it, *and* that the pious is a fixed and pre-existing trait to which their love responds or is beholden? He seems to believe, in other

words, that the gods are free, willful, supreme, and potentially amoral. But he also seems to believe that the gods are bound, responsive (to a standard), subordinate, and moral. Why does he hold both opinions at once?[136]

The difficulty can be expressed in the following way. Piety is the worship of what is highest in the cosmos. The gods are the pinnacle of the cosmos and as such worthy of the utmost reverence. But precisely to be worthy of the utmost reverence, the gods must be just. They must in other words be beholden to, subordinate to, a standard. In that case, what is highest in the cosmos will be the standard itself. Therefore piety, as the worship of what is highest in the cosmos, must be directed toward that standard itself, if it is knowable. But a standard, being insentient, thus being incapable of enforcing justice or providing the good, cannot be prayed to. The gods, then, must be prayed to in order that they will freely choose to provide support for virtue or enforce the standard of justice. Or rather, the gods will necessarily enforce that standard, for they are supremely just, largely predictable, and worthy of reverence. An unjust god would be unworthy of reverence—would be not a god at all but rather a monster. Yet a being that enforces justice with absolute rigor would be cold and draconian. The gods, then, are not beholden to the standard of justice but rather free to choose mercy, free to respond to our prayers despite our unworthiness. The gods are responsive, willful, and beholden to nothing. Only then can they be perfectly merciful and perfectly powerful. They must be perfectly powerful because power is exalted, noble, and beautiful, and the gods can lack nothing of that character. But one of the most exalted, noble, and beautiful things is morality. The gods, being supremely moral and supremely

[136] I disagree with Burnet's assertion that there is a shift at 9e from *ad hominem* argumentation to "something much more fundamental" (1954, 47) It seems to me that the argument remains *ad hominem* in Burnet's sense: Socrates is not employing philosophic notions to disprove Euthyphro's understanding of the pious, but is rather testing whether Euthyphro *himself* really believes, and can stick with, what he purports to believe.

worthy of reverence, must bow to a limitation, to a higher standard, a fixed standard over which their wills have no power.

To approach the question from another angle, we may say that the ultimate cause of Euthyphro's difficulty is a conflation of two qualities: the loved and the lovable. The god-loved and the pious are different, Socrates observes, "for the one, because it is loved, is the sort of thing to be loved; the other, because it is the sort of thing to be loved, is loved" (11a4-6). But why would a person, in considering the pious, tend to conflate the loved and the lovable? The pious, as a class, includes especially (pious) actions. And pious actions are most noble. It was revealed earlier that Euthyphro had great difficulty in understanding the character of his own noble actions. He was inclined to understand those actions, insofar as they were noble, as both good for him and bad for him. A pious action, being most noble, may seem to Euthyphro at some times intrinsically good and lovable, and at other times not good (or even pious) until it is loved by the gods. According to this theory of Euthyphro's psychology, we would expect it to be at the moments when his faith in the intrinsic goodness of noble action—his faith in an inherent consonance between the noble and the good—falters, that he would be most in need of the gods as enforcers of justice; that is, as restorers of the consonance for which he had become accustomed to hope.[137]

[137] Although he refers to Euthyphro's identification of the pious and the just, Marlo Lewis at times neglects the role of the desire for justice in the hearts and minds of the pious. As he puts it: "it is man's fear of natural terrors, combined with his native ignorance of their causes, which disposes him to ascribe his good or ill fortune to the interventions of invisible superhuman beings. In worshipping the gods, man worships the personification of his own fears" (1985, 50, compare 61). But it is telling that in order to support this position, he includes a footnote not to Plato, but to Hobbes and Spinoza. This 'modern tint' on Socratic political philosophy is, I would argue, a recurrent problem with his analysis (see 65, 225, 230, 231, 242, 258) which leads him into an overconfidence with regard to what can be known about the gods (65, 225).

The Substitution

At this point in the conversation, Euthyphro is understandably confused. To make the outcome of the argument "more clear" to him, Socrates employs a complicated substitution.

First, we take it as given that, in accordance with Euthyphro's definition, the god-loved and the pious are equivalent. Therefore one can be substituted for the other.[138] The argument, however, has arrived at two conclusions: (1) the pious is loved because of being pious, and (2) the god-loved is god-loved because of being loved. And these two claims, upon undergoing the substitution in question, yield: (1b) the god-loved is loved because of being god-loved, and (2b) the pious is pious because of being loved. But claim 2b, then, contradicts claim 1. (According to claim 2b, divine love causes the trait of being pious; but according to claim 1, the trait of being pious causes divine love.) And claim 1b contradicts claim 2, which (having been agreed upon at 10c10-12) posits the logical necessity that love causes the trait of being-loved, rather than *being* caused by such a trait. Thus the definition which has resulted in this mess of contradictions—the definition which claimed an equivalence and therefore an interchangeability of the pious and the god-loved—must be abandoned.[139]

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[138] Geach objects (376-377) that the substitution violates the condition of *salva veritate* in an intentional context. I take Allen's (1970) refutation of this objection to be definitive. Not only is the substitution in question not essential to the argument, but the substitution itself is valid because it involves categories which are (according to Euthyphro) not merely coextensive but identical in essence.

[139] The purpose of employing the substitution in the first place is unclear, for the argument has already been completed with the unveiling of the contradiction. But perhaps Socrates intends (1) to indicate, by rephrasing a contradiction as a violation of causality, the problem that intervening gods would pose to the philosophic notion of nature as a realm of intelligible necessity, or, more likely, (2) to confuse Euthyphro by making the argument even more theoretical and abstruse than it was, perhaps as a form of philanthropy.

Of course, there would be other means of escaping from these contradictions. Euthyphro could retain his definition of the pious (as the god-loved) if he decided to deny that divine love was at all analogous to human love. If the love of the gods, in some unfathomable way, can in fact be caused *by* the trait of being-loved (in a thing), while it also causes that trait, then the definition could be salvaged. That is, it could be salvaged by a denial of any similarity between divine love and human love. This option is not taken by Euthyphro, either because it does not occur to him or because gods who loved or cared for human beings in a way that was not at all analogous to human love or care would be difficult to revere, obey, or believe in (although they could be asserted to exist: see again Maimonides I.50).

The most obvious means of escaping the contradiction, however, would be to deny the validity of claim 1 (that the pious is loved because of being pious). Indeed, that claim is like a foreign body in the argument, destroying its coherence from within. And it is Euthyphro's unyielding insistence on it, his tenacious grip, that leads inevitably to the collapse and abandonment of the second definition of the pious (as the dear). And so it is with some justification that Socrates concludes—although the argument has revealed only that Euthyphro holds two contradictory opinions at once, not which of those opinions is stronger—that Euthyphro's stronger or deeper opinion is, after all, that the pious is a cause of divine love rather than its effect. The essence of the pious, then, does not lie in its being loved by the gods. That quality is not essential to the pious, but merely incidental:

> And probably, Euthyphro, when you are asked what ever the pious is, you don't wish to make clear to me its substance, but rather to speak of a certain affection concerning it: that the pious is affected in being loved by all gods. But what it is, you haven't yet said. So if you please, don't hide it from me… (11a6-b1)

The conclusion that the quality of being god-loved is an affection (a *pathos*) of the pious, rather than its essence or the distinguishing mark of the class, has been established. But it has been established not, as many commentators would have it, on the basis of a mere application of logic or fancy philosophic terminology. Rather, it has been established *dialectically*, on the basis of Euthyphro's own opinions; the fancy terminology provides only a subsequent description of what Euthyphro holds to be true.[140] At the crucial moment, fighting against the grain of the entire argument (and indeed abandoning it), he preferred to believe that the content of the pious, as a class, was determined by something other than divine will, whim, or affection. It would seem that his deeper opinion, the opinion that he holds with more passion and confidence, is that the pious has a fixed essence of its own, an *idea*, to which divine love is not fundamental but only incidental.[141]

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[140] See Bruell 1999, 127, Blits 1980, 19, and Cobb 1989, 10 in opposition to Allen 1970, 67, Rabinowitz 1958, 109-111 and 118fn.1, Burnet 1954, 47-48, Lewis 1985, 258, and Dimas 2006, 2. Scholars routinely mistake the prelude to the argument (which clarifies the relation between actions and passive traits) for the heart of the argument (which depends on what Euthyphro himself believes). See, for instance, Burns 1985, 319: "Plato has insisted that the definition provide the characteristic 'which makes a thing to be the thing it is,' *thus* ruling out 'loved by the gods' as a definition" (emphasis added). McPherran, likewise, fails to note that the argument here proceeds on the basis of Euthyphro's own opinions, rather than on the basis of more 'theoretical' considerations such as what qualities inhere or fail to inhere in a being that has membership in some class. The second definition of the pious (as what is loved by the gods) is rejected not because it points only to an "agent-dependent passive property," nor because of the need to find "some explanatory property *y* that inheres in *x*" (1996, 44-45). Rather, the definition is rejected because of Euthyphro's own (contrary) opinion that the pious is not a class defined by divine love. McPherran does not take seriously, as Socrates, if we may judge from his initial praise of the second definition, seems to take seriously, the possibility that 'the pious' actually *is* merely the class of things loved by the gods. The problem with McPherran's account of this argument is connected with the more general neglect, by McPherran along with most other scholars, of Socrates' desire to learn something from Euthyphro. See also Howland (2001, 220-221), who, while emphasizing Socrates' faith and humility, takes the suggestions that Socrates hopes to learn from Euthyphro as "obviously ironic."

[141] With regard to the analysis of this section of the dialogue, I disagree with the interpretation of Marlo Lewis (1985). According to Lewis (44), the "only legitimate inference that can be drawn from Socrates' long and tedious argument" here is a "trivial proposition," namely the following: "not because the holy is a god-beloved thing is it loved by the gods,

The Comic Interlude (11b1-e4)

After the discarding of his second definition of the pious, Euthyphro is intensely frustrated. In this brief interlude, which precedes the introduction of the third definition, Socrates contributes to Euthyphro's frustration by asking him to say again "from the beginning" what ever the pious is (11b1-5). Euthyphro complains: he is unable to say "what he has in mind" or "knows." What he has in mind, what he knows to be true, would appear to be incommunicable. For the opinions, once "put forward" or spoken, keep moving around and won't stay where they are placed (11b6-8). Socrates compares him to Daedalus, the sculptor whose statues moved as if they were alive. Your works in speech, he confirms to Euthyphro, aren't willing to stay still for you, "as it seems to you yourself as well" (11b9-c7). In response, Euthyphro accuses Socrates: it is *his* fault that the opinions move about. They didn't move at all before Socrates came along (11c8-d2). Socrates takes this accusation as a compliment: he must be even more clever than Daedalus was, if he can make not only his own works but also the works of others move. But his wisdom is involuntary: he would prefer that the speeches stay still for him, rather than "in addition to the wisdom of Daedalus, to get the money of Tantalus" (11d3-e1). After making this comment, Socrates offers to take a more active role as a pupil: he himself will lead Euthyphro toward a new definition of the pious (11e2-4).

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rather, it is a god-beloved thing because they love it." While he subsequently returns to the theme of the relationship between piety and justice (46), Lewis does not adequately point out what Socrates learns here, namely a crucial fact about Euthyphro's psychology, as described above. On the whole, as discussed previously, Lewis does not do justice to Socrates' desire to learn from Euthyphro, and for that reason he misses the primary purpose of the dialogue (see 64, 232, 250, 252, 257).

The Point of the Interlude

The interlude is puzzling. What is its purpose? It is strange to punctuate such a brief dialogue with such a lengthy comic exchange. The interlude appears, with all of its boasts and jests, to lack philosophic content. Indeed, the rudeness of Socrates in the interlude is striking. Repeatedly he insults Euthyphro, calling him worthy of ridicule (11b9-c7), confused (c6-7), spoiled (11e2), and, by implication, weak or lazy (11e4). And his boasting seems almost calculated to infuriate his interlocutor. For he turns Euthyphro's indignant accusation—that Socrates is meddling with his opinions, creating and mocking the mere illusion of confusion—into a gratifying compliment: Then I must be wise, he replies, more clever and refined in my art than even that famous sculptor, Daedalus. What is the point of this lengthy, rude, and boastful interlude?[142]

Images have a way of sticking in the mind. The analogy to the moving sculptures of Daedalus, employed in other Platonic dialogues as well,[143] serves here to emphasize the movement of Euthyphro's opinions. But that 'movement' proves, upon analysis, to be a euphemism for the result of the compulsory power of reason on belief.[144] For the movement in question results from Euthyphro's inability to hold fast to two opinions that have been

[142] I disagree with those commentators who, citing in many cases "Bonitz's Principle," understand the interlude to be a marker or a signal that the "positive teaching" of the dialogue is to be found in what follows (see for instance Adam 2010, xii, Burnet 1954, 50, and McPherran 1996, 49). Such an approach seems to me to underestimate the organic unity of the *Euthyphro*. The investigation of the third definition cannot be considered in isolation from, but rather follows necessarily from, the investigation of the second.

[143] In the *Meno*, Socrates uses this same analogy just before defining virtue as true opinion entering the soul through divine allotment without intellect (100a) and grouping the political men with the mindlessly inspired prophets (99c-d).

[144] Here I disagree with Lewis, who claims that Euthyphro is simply tired of following "a long and tortuous argument step by step. The motion of which he complains is, at bottom, the discursive activity of reason" (1985, 46). I would argue that it is not the movement of reason or the argument as such, but rather the tensions or contradictions which the argument reveals, that dissatisfy the would-be prophet.

shown to be contradictory; that is, his inability—upon facing squarely their contradiction—to persist in believing them both. He believed at first that the essence of the pious was the god-loved. But he was brought to glimpse that he somehow believed, at the same time, that the essence of the pious was not the god-loved. When these two opinions were brought forth from the haze of his mind into the light, he proved to be incapable of believing them both. For when Socrates concluded that the god-loved must not be the essence of the pious, he did not dispute this (11a6-b5).

Upon examining the dialogue as a whole, we find that this power, the compulsory power of reason on belief (or on the mind), is evident in at least one other instance. For according to Euthyphro's first definition, the pious was the (punitively) just. He understood justice to be the impartial giving of what is deserved. Spurning the conflation of the just with the common or familial advantage, he had decided that the only pious course for him was to prosecute his own father. But in the final section of the dialogue, he will be brought to assert—in searching for an appropriate 'work' for the gods to engage in—that the main point of piety is in fact the preservation of "private families as well as the common things of cities" (14b4-5). Piety as the pursuit of impartial desert—families and cities be damned—becomes, then, piety as the pursuit of the common good of cities and families. In other words, a reasoned argument will convince him to move from one opinion—originally experienced as undoubtedly true, and even bolstered by divine revelation (5e5-6a6)—toward another. The ending of the dialogue (15e3-4) may even indicate that he has decided to drop the case against his father; in other words, that he has lost his feeling of certainty that the gods demand such a prosecution.[145] *That* such opinions can be made to move, through the

[145] At the end of the dialogue, Euthyphro hurries away, citing other business. If, at the beginning of the dialogue, he had encountered Socrates before presenting his case to the King, his abrupt departure would indicate a shift in his understanding of what the gods

compulsory power of reason, may be as important to Plato as precisely *how* they are made to move (that is, from what old opinion to what new opinion). Their movement, as such, may be helpful in understanding the solidity of the initial claim to knowledge made by the pious.[146] But it is also worth noting that Euthyphro appears to move from an understanding of piety as a specific action (the prosecution of his father) or as the pursuit of distributive justice, to an understanding of piety as justice understood as service to the common good. Of course Euthyphro's stance, which may well have some validity to it, is that the movement of his opinions is an imposition on the part of Socrates, a creation of tensions that did not initially exist.

Plato depicts the conversation that takes place in the *Euthyphro*. But Socrates participates in that conversation. Therefore the motive or motives belonging to Plato, in depicting (and extending) the comic interlude as he does, may differ from the motive or motives belonging to the character Socrates, in speaking as he does. Why does Socrates boast and jest and insult his acquaintance as he does in this interlude?

To answer this question, we must consider why the interlude is comic. The interlude is comic because it makes Euthyphro laughable. But what makes a person laughable does not make him laugh; on the contrary, it makes him angry. Indeed Socrates, mocking and preening, seems to intend to infuriate his acquaintance. The word *thumos* and words derivative of *thumos* are referenced seven times in the *Euthyphro*. Two of those references occur here, bookending the comic interlude. Socrates urges Euthyphro to, "Tell me

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required of him, a shift resulting from the dialectical method of Socrates. Plato leaves the implications of his departure ambiguous, perhaps intentionally so.

[146] Here I disagree with Adam 2010, xxiv: "When [Euthyphro] is confronted with the necessity of defending his position, he submits with the amiable condescending smile of a man who is impervious to reason, because he claims to stand on the higher platform of inspiration and faith: and when he is refuted, instead of distrusting himself, he takes refuge in the old position from which he has long ago been dislodged."

eagerly/zealously (*prothumos*) what are the pious and the impious" (11b4-5). And at the conclusion of the interlude, he says that he will now "share in eagerness with you (*sumprothumesomai*) to show you how you may teach me about the pious" (11e3-4). Perhaps Socrates intends, by making Euthyphro angry, to prepare him in some way for the next definition of the pious. It may be helpful or necessary to inflame Euthyphro's sense of justice, in order to understand—as Socrates will now attempt to do—the precise character of the opinions about justice that undergird or contribute to his piety.

Definition Three: The Pious as a Subset of the Just (11e4-15b6)

Driven onward by Socrates, Euthyphro consents to an investigation of the third (and final) definition of the pious.

He agrees that all of the pious is just (11e4-6). And he is led to agree in addition that not all of the just is pious—that is, that the pious is a subset or part of the just. To obtain from Euthyphro this agreement, Socrates employs two examples: the example provided by a quotation from the poet Stasinus (with whom Socrates disagrees) and the example provided by number (of which the "odd" is a subset or part). The pious is a part of the just, he remarks, as the odd is a part of number (11e7-12d4). "What comes after this," then, is a determination of "what part of the just the pious would be." If he is able to learn this, Socrates says that he will be free of the indictment of Meletus. And the pious turns out to be, according to Euthyphro, that part of the just which concerns the tendance of the gods (rather than human beings) (12d6-12e9). The rest of the investigation in this section is devoted to the question: What kind of tendance (*therapeia*) is our tendance of the gods? Three possibilities are considered. The first possibility, tendance in the strict sense, or

therapy (*therepeia*), is abandoned on account of Euthyphro's denial that we (human beings) could possibly make the gods better (12e10-13d4). The second possibility, a kind of slavish or menial service to the gods (*hypēretikē*), prompts the question of what the gods' work is, the work for which our piety provides some assistance. That the gods' work turns out to be the preservation "of private families and the common things of cities" (13d5-14c5) prompts the third and final possibility, that our tendance of the gods is not slavish service but rather one side of a commercial or transactional relationship (*emporike*). At this suggestion Euthyphro is disgusted, and Socrates, unable to discover any way in which we might benefit the gods in this commercial exchange, allows the discussion to slip back into an equation of the pious with the dear to the gods, effectively ending the argument (14c6-15b6). But what is the meaning or message of this section?

The Impossibility of Active or Desiring Gods

According to one prevalent theory, which I will briefly investigate, this section of the dialogue more or less conclusively demonstrates the impossibility of active, desiring, or providential gods. That this demonstration, radical as it is, might be the hidden meaning of this section is indicated by the recurrent question of how we (human beings) could possibly benefit the gods.

Having established that our relationship with the gods is some kind of just tendance, Socrates and Euthyphro consider, as outlined in the summary above, three types of tendance in turn. The discussion of the first type of tendance (*therepeia*) brings to light Euthyphro's violent objection—he swears by Zeus multiple times (13c3, 13c10)—to the idea that human beings might in any way make the gods better. His objection, and the violence of it, may be

taken to indicate a belief that the gods are perfect and self-sufficient, rather than needy or incomplete. The discussion of the second type of tendance (*hypēretikē*) falters for a similar reason: how could we possibly benefit the gods in whatever work it is that they do? Why would they need assistance from human beings in their work? And the third discussion, which concerns the commercial or transactional tendance of the gods, emphasizes once again the question of our benefiting the gods. Euthyphro's final inability to explain how we (or our piety) might benefit the gods—indeed, his denial that we do—points to the problem or contradiction in his understanding of the gods themselves. For he believes both that they are perfect and self-sufficient, and that they work actively for our benefit (preserving families and cities, as he says). But the precondition of activity or action is desire. And desire implies a lack. A perfect and self-sufficient being, lacking nothing, would have no desires and no impulse to act or to benefit human beings. Thus the gods, being perfect, cannot be providential or helpful to human beings.[147]

This interpretation is of some interest, but it has massive problems. For in the first place, it converts the final section of the dialogue into nothing more than a long and tiresome lecture. If Socrates holds the opinion that the gods, as traditionally understood, are logically impossible, then his motive in speaking to Euthyphro becomes rather unclear. Throughout the dialogue, he claims repeatedly that his intention is not to teach or mock the prophet, but rather to learn from him (5b2-6, 9c2-6, 9d8-10, 12e1-5, 15c11-12, 15e1-2, 15e5-16a4). If these claims are merely ironic, if Socrates already has the gods all figured out, why

[147] The analysis of Lewis follows this model (1985, 45-46, 49, 54-55, 60, 231) but for its more radical conclusions depends on a blurring of *eros* and *philia* (as in the god-beloved, *theophiles*): "Lacking nothing desirable, [the gods] desire nothing. Divine love is an oxymoron, for the true gods are non-erotic. If the holy is that which is god-beloved, the holy 'is not' " (49). For another version of the general argument, see Versenyi 1982, 120-124 (cf. also the rebuttal by McPherran 1996, 59-60, as well as *Epin.* 985a1-9).

does he bother to speak to Euthyphro at all? That he is engaged in a sermon or a debunking diatribe, pontificating for the sake of Schadenfreude alone, seems unlikely.

In the second place, and more importantly, the argument about the gods that has been outlined above is not compelling at a theoretical level. For it assumes that the gods are analogous to human beings and intelligible to human minds. In particular, it assumes that divine love—indeed, divine psychology in general—is fathomable to us. But what if the gods, being radically unlike us, are to some extent unfathomable—even as human beings are to ants?[148] The argument that purports to prove the impossibility of desiring, active, or providential gods in fact imports abstruse philosophic premises and conclusions about the essence of desire—premises and conclusions which are never dialectically established—and then applies them to the minds and motives of unknown and potentially unknowable beings. We must set this interpretation aside, then, and return to it only if nothing more compelling can be found.[149]

The Relational Problem of Rule and the Nobility of the Gods

The key to comprehending this section, to comprehending the validity or invalidity of the third definition of piety, would appear to lie in the three-part investigation of tendance. What type of tendance of the gods is piety? That three-part investigation is introduced by a reference to Meletus (12e2-5). And this reference is surprising. For the last

[148] Consider in this context *Ti.* 29c-d.

[149] It is ultimately insufficient to say that the gods must, in their manner of desiring and acting, be analogous and fathomable to human beings in order to be believed in (see Lewis 1985, 55). For one could sense the presence of the gods, and understand the content (and the sanctions) of their commands, without grasping the inner workings of their minds.

time that Meletus was mentioned was prior to the very first definition of the pious (5c6). So why bring up Meletus now?

In seeking to understand the psychology of Meletus (understood as the ideal statesman), we labeled his uncertainty or collection of uncertainties "the relational problem of rule." He appeared to be uncertain, in particular, as to whether he was ruling over the city or being ruled by it. That is, he was uncertain as to whether he was above or below the city in rank or dignity. This problem, the relational problem of rule, would appear to rear its head again in this section of the dialogue. For the three-part investigation of tendance implies a similar ambiguity.

The discussion of tendance or therapy (*therepeia*) would appear to have the primary goal of drawing from Euthyphro the response that it succeeds in drawing from him: a vehement denial that we can or do benefit the gods or make them better (13c10). But this discussion may have, at its core, another goal. For the examples of tendance that Socrates chooses are highly irreverent. He calls to Euthyphro's attention the tendance of horses, dogs, and cattle. Doesn't every tendance, he asks, bring about "something like this (*hoion toionde*): Is it for a certain good and benefit of the one tended?" (13b8-9). But his qualification—"something like this"—calls to our attention the imprecision of his claim. For while it may be said that the horseman or the huntsman seeks to benefit his horse or his dogs, it surely cannot be said that the herdsman seeks primarily to benefit his cattle. Indeed, all three examples that Socrates gives are examples of care that is ultimately selfish. The benefit for the horseman's horse, or the benefit for the huntsman's dogs, is for the most part an incidental byproduct of the selfish *use* of them. So it would seem that the thesis of this section, thinly veiled, is that we use the gods as our tools or even as our slaves.[150]

[150] See Versenyi 1982, 109 and Lewis 1985, 54-58.

Euthyphro's shock and vehemence, then—his repeated use of religious oaths in denying that human beings might benefit or better the gods—is traceable partly to his awareness, however hazy, of the implication that we might be above the gods, using or ruling them as our tools or slaves. To conceive of the gods as below human beings in rank or dignity is obviously abhorrent to him.

In reaction to the tacit thesis that the gods are beneath us, Euthyphro flees as far as he can in the opposite direction. The gods are so far from being beneath us that they are like masters ruling over slaves. Piety, then, is merely a slavish or menial service to the gods (*hypēretikē*). But this understanding of piety proves—surprisingly—to be almost as problematic as the last one. For if the gods are truly above us, worlds above us in rank or dignity, they threaten to detach entirely, becoming indifferent to our lives and interests. What motive would still exist for such exalted beings to *serve* us? To serve the interest of one's menial tools can hardly be considered a worthy or exalted task. Indeed, by restoring the extreme elevation of the gods, Euthyphro may have inadvertently stripped their rule of its nobility. [151]

The desire to confront this problem may well motivate the attempt to determine, in this section, what the work of the gods might be. For Euthyphro does not reply, to the questioning of Socrates, that the work of the gods—for which they use us, or our piety, as menial tools—is none of our concern. Indeed, he is dissatisfied with leaving the work of the gods (1) untethered from the good of human beings, or (2) unknown or unknowable, such that it might, for all we know, be untethered from our good. Asked three times in succession what the work of the gods is (that is, what they produce, using us as servants), Euthyphro

[151] Maimonides confronts the possibility that God might neglect the governance of human beings just as a man, "for instance, neglects the governance of the cats in his house or of even more contemptible beings" (III.16).

hedges twice and finally cracks: in a response of great significance, he re-tethers the activity of the gods to the good of "private families and cities" (14b5-6).

But this response, of course, threatens to make the gods, once again, our tools or servants. It threatens to relocate them beneath us.[152] And Socrates therefore interprets the response in the only way available to him. Avoiding the whirlpool of divine subordination, he steers instead for a new conception of tendance: the gods must be, in some decisive sense, *equal* to human beings. We must be involved in an equal exchange with them, according to which each party serves the interest of the other. Yet it does not take long before Euthyphro, grasping the essence of this conception, balks. For when Socrates asks him if piety is an art of commerce between gods and human beings, he is clearly disgusted; Socrates can give it that name if it pleases him to do so (14e8). It is clear that Euthyphro, for his part, is not pleased. Indeed, he is not pleased by any of the three conceptions of tendance or piety, taken singly. The gods cannot be below human beings in rank or dignity. Neither can they be above us, for that would strip their rule of its plausibility and nobility.[153] Neither can they be equal. With each of the three logical possibilities (when taken singly) ruled out as unacceptable, Euthyphro is left hopping from one to the next, as if from one slippery rock to another.

This, then, would be an interpretation of this section through the lens of the relational problem of rule. But this interpretation, too, has its problems. For it too—like the

[152] For a different interpretation of the three levels or relations at work here, see Lewis 1985, 51ff.

[153] According to this line of argument, nobility requires that one serve something above oneself; thus either our piety is noble or the gods are, but not both. (Alternatively, the gods might serve not us but rather a standard beyond themselves.) Perhaps Euthyphro's wavering as to whether the gods are noble or not is related to, or caused by, his earlier uncertainty as to whether nobility is good or bad for the noble. On the question of the morality of God, consider Maimonides III.52 on true virtue as the intellectual apprehension of God or rather of His moral actions.

supposed disproof of providential, active, or desiring gods—assumes that the gods are fathomable. And worse still, it ignores entirely a crucial dimension of psychology, a dimension that may prove to radically alter the question of rank and motive. That dimension is love. For if the gods are lovers of human beings, the question of relative rank may well be in effect irrelevant. The gods, though infinitely far above us, may yet love us and love our virtues. And that love might imply no stooping, no subordination of the divine to the human. It might, indeed, be a fantastic overflow of divine generosity and affection for what, though infinitely small, kindles a certain warmth in the hearts of the gods. And so the interpretation of this section as a critique of the intelligibility of political or ruling gods—a critique based on the relational problem of rule—must, it seems, be abandoned as well.

The Nobility of Piety

As an interpretation of this section, one final theory seems plausible. For the two interpretations above did not do justice to the way in which the three-part discussion of tendance is introduced. Preceding that discussion is an effort, on the part of Socrates, to explain to Euthyphro what he means by calling the pious a part of the just. That effort proves to be laborious. But it is laborious not, as we might expect, through any fault of Euthyphro's. Indeed, it is Socrates who chooses—as an explanation of what he means by calling one class a part or a subset of a bigger class—an extremely confusing example. For the two classes involved in the example that he chooses—which is a line of poetry by Stasinus: "where there is dread, there is awe" (12b1)—are suspiciously similar to the two classes at issue in the conversation, the just and the pious. Their similarity, moreover, does not clarify but rather obfuscates and bewilders, to the point that Socrates finds it necessary

to employ a second example, the example of "odd" as a subset of number, in order to explain what he meant in the first place: "Surely you follow me now?" he asks (12c8). But if Socrates merely wanted Euthyphro to understand what he meant by a 'part-whole relationship,' he could have skipped to the example of number and avoided the lengthy and confusing digression into dread and awe. Perhaps, then, the digression serves some other purpose.

Indeed, Socrates says as much: in calling the pious a subset of the just, he is "saying the opposite of what the poet composed" who said "where there is dread, there is awe." He thus implies that dread is analogous to justice, and awe is analogous to piety. He interprets Stasinus to mean that dread is a subset of awe. This claim he disproves with ease: many people dread disease and poverty, but are not in awe of the things they dread. Rather, the truth is, according to Socrates, that awe is a subset of dread. "For doesn't anyone who feels awe and shame in some matter also fear and dread a reputation for villainy?" (12b9-c1).

But this entire line of argument is—in addition to being convoluted—extremely dubious. For did Stasinus ever mean to claim that dread was a subset of awe? That claim is ridiculous, as is evidenced by the ease with which Socrates debunks it. Far more likely, it seems, is that Stasinus meant to claim that dread necessarily *causes* awe.[154] And not only does Socrates misinterpret Stasinus (so as to debunk him); he is also forced to cheat in order to make his own suggestion—that awe is rather a subset of dread—seem plausible. He cheats in two ways. First, he holds his own suggestion to a lower bar of proof than that to which he held the claim of Stasinus. For Stasinus was disproven on the basis of the suggestion that, when people dread things, such as disease or poverty, they are not necessarily in awe of the very things which they dread. Yet Socrates does not make it clear that when people are in

[154] In interpreting this section I am indebted to Christopher Bruell (1999, 131-133).

awe of things, they necessarily dread the very things for which they feel awe. Indeed, his reference to reputation (*doxa*: 12c1) indicates that the dread in question is felt toward human beings rather than toward the gods. Second, in order to prove that awe is a subset of dread, he links "shame" with the feeling of awe. To revisit the quotation, he asks: "Doesn't anyone who feels awe *and shame* in some matter also fear and dread a reputation for villainy" (12b9-c1). But it is unfair to insert shame—which is akin to fear—as a means of proving that awe by itself is a subset of fear. In other words, it is only the unfair insertion of shame, or its unjustified conjunction with awe, which renders at all plausible the claim that awe is a subset of dread. Indeed, the claim that awe is a mere subset of dread is crass, reductionist, and patently false. For awe involves admiration, self-transcendence, love, aspiration to the heights. To reduce the entire religious experience to one of fear is doubly strange coming from a man who praised divine madness in the *Phaedrus* and encouraged the just and holy assimilation to the divine in the *Theaetetus*.[155]

All of these complexities and contradictions point us back—to Stasinus. For what if we restore to his verse its more likely interpretation: that dread necessarily causes awe? If Socrates is, then, as he claims to be, "saying the opposite" of this, he would be saying that awe causes dread (of reputation). Yet these examples, awe and dread, were surely not chosen at random, but rather for their close similarity to the classes in question in the dialogue: piety and justice. We are entitled, therefore, to make the experiment of substituting piety and justice for awe and dread, respectively. This substitution yields, for Stasinus, the claim that justice causes piety. For Socrates, it yields the claim that piety causes justice. And yet, as we have seen, if Socrates holds either of these two positions, it is surely the former rather than

[155] By mentioning reverence (*eusebē*) at 12e5, Socrates may intend to point toward what is being left out of the argument. See also Burnet 1954: "It is easier to see that *aisxune* is a species of *phobos* than that *aidos* is a species of *deos*" (54).

the latter. It may be, then, that Socrates is once again testing his own theory by attempting to prove the truth of its opposite. For if piety causes justice, then the gods, and the experience of contact with the gods, in some important sense precedes and can exist independently of justice. In other words, the gods, in the experience of believers, would not be necessarily beholden to the *idea* of justice, for they would precede it and perhaps be capable of altering it or determining its character. But if justice causes piety, then justice in some important sense precedes and can exist independently of the gods and the experience of contact with the gods. In other words, the *idea* (and allure) of justice would be not simply the result of divine intervention or revelatory contact with divinity, but would rather be a cause of that contact or would have an influence over the form that contact took.[156]

If we return, then, to the three-part investigation of tendance—as therapy, as menial service, and as commerce—with this hypothesis about Socrates' intention in mind, we return with a new lens. The discussion of the first form of tendance (*therepeia*) can be understood as an initial attempt, on the part of Socrates, to strip piety of its nobility. Our tendance of the gods, he implies, is like the herdsman's tendance of cattle: whatever we do for the gods is done ultimately for our own benefit. Swearing twice by Zeus, Euthyphro flees from this implication: piety, so far from being ignoble and selfish, is rather the kind of tendance "with which slaves tend their masters" (13d6-7). This response is a fitting repudiation of the ignoble or reductionist trajectory of Socrates' questions. For despite what we might assume about slavery—that it is base or ignoble—there can be a great nobility in a voluntary slavery to what is high, in a selfless servitude to what has great beauty or dignity (consider *Symposium* 183a-b).

[156] Socrates would surely grant that piety and justice, in many instances, cause each other. But the question here concerns whether the causal relationship is stronger in one direction than the other, or whether justice can be understood as a condition of piety (or vice versa).

And yet Euthyphro finds it difficult to maintain this conception of piety as selfless service to the gods. Indeed, the shift toward the third (and less noble) understanding of tendance—as commerce—is a shift not entirely attributable to Socrates. For it is Euthyphro himself who decides, when he is asked repeatedly about what "work" the gods bring to fruition using us as their servants, to re-tether (piety and) the gods to the human good.[157] When Socrates asks him for the third and final time what the gods produce, his lengthy answer includes the following: "I tell you simply that if someone has knowledge of how to say and do things gratifying to the gods by praying and sacrificing, these are the pious things, and such things preserve private families as well as the common things of cities" (14b2-5). So the works of the gods would appear to be the preservation of families and cities.[158] Euthyphro proves to be dissatisfied, then, with a piety that is not good for human beings; indeed, the point of piety turns out to be the good of families and cities.[159] But neither is he

[157] According to McPherran, Socrates, while holding the thesis that piety is service to the gods in a work that produces some good results (1996, 54-55), remains agnostic as to what this work or its good results are: "aside from the belief that the gods are good, the specifics of divine behavior (including their chief *ergon*) and their nature are not fully accessible to us" (75). But if Socrates were so uncertain as to the work or works of the gods, it is not clear why he would be—as, on McPherran's account, he is—certain that the gods are just, good, or reasonable, or why he would feel competent to render them "*more* believable by eliminating their nonsensical squabbles" (75).

[158] We must not interpret Euthyphro to mean here that piety by itself, independent of the works or existence of the gods, preserves families and cities. That response would be impious.

[159] I disagree with Burnet's ultimate interpretation of the dialogue. In his account, "the vital point" of the dialogue is the unanswered question of what altogether noble work we assist the gods in producing. The lack of an answer to that question, according to Burnet, implies that the question is unanswerable, and its un-answerability implies that true piety is not a matter of actions but rather "a condition of the soul" (57)—or a science (58)—and that it is our "whole duty," according to the doctrine of the true Socratic, "to care for our souls that they may be as wise and as good as possible (*Ap.* 29d7 sqq.), and this means that man's chief end is 'assimilation to god as far as may be', and, as is at once explained, 'assimilation to God' means 'to become righteous and holy with wisdom' [*Thea.* 176b]. From that point of view the true nature of *hosiotes* becomes intelligible" (57, compare 59). But, as may be already evident from the quotation, this interpretation requires a great deal of imposition and inference on the basis of what is said in other dialogues. Burnet seems, like most

inclined to face its goodness for human beings squarely, as his response indicates. For although he was asked merely about the works of the gods, he buries those works—and in this way buries the utility of piety and the gods (for human beings)—deep within his rambling answer, which includes also knowledge, virtue, prayer, sacrifice, and the gratification of the gods.[160]

His aversion to considering the goodness of piety in isolation from its nobility or selflessness is particularly evident in his response to Socrates' characterization of piety as commerce. For when Socrates—who remarks that Euthyphro might have answered him more briefly about the works of the gods, but that he "turned away" at the crucial moment—attempts to tease out and isolate the most selfish or utilitarian strand of that answer, Euthyphro proves to be disgusted. Indeed, Socrates here sets out to depict piety in the most crass manner possible. He interprets sacrifice as a giving of gifts to the gods, and praying as merely a requesting of good things. Then, reversing the order of these two actions, he defines piety as "a knowledge of requesting from and giving to gods" (14d1-2). Even a *do ut des* piety—"I give in order that you might give"—puts the giving first and thus leaves some room for virtue, affection, or devotion. But Socrates depicts piety as an economic exchange according to which we first request and receive gifts from the gods—and only then, after receiving what we need, give back (*antidoreisthai*: 14e2) what the gods

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commentators, to underestimate the extent to which Socrates is actually trying to learn something from Euthyphro, rather than pushing him toward (or ignoring his claims on the basis of) some predetermined understanding of the pious.

[160] McPherran 1996, 62-63 argues (against Versenyi) that there is no evidence for the supposition that the gods' work is primarily to accomplish the good in human life (rather than in the universe as a whole). But some evidence for that supposition is here, in Euthyphro's response—that is, in the response of a man who feels himself to be in touch with the gods or to know something of their concerns and activities. That response also seems to me strong evidence against the hypothesis of Hoerber, that Euthyphro "regards piety as departmentalized, as a 'Sunday religion,' definitely separated from his obligations to human society" (1958, 105).

need, as a kind of payment for their services.[161] And at the peak (or nadir) of Socrates' crass account, he proclaims that piety must be "a certain art of commerce for gods and human beings with each other" (14e6-7).

Euthyphro's response drips with disdain. "Commerce," he says, "if it is more pleasant for you to name it in this way" (14e8). Socrates can name it commerce if he wants to—or rather, if it is more *pleasant* for him to name it in this way. 'Commerce,' then, is merely a name; it is a merely a name chosen by Socrates, not by Euthyphro; and it is a name chosen merely because it is pleasant for Socrates, not because it is accurate. This is Socrates' theory of piety; indignantly, Euthyphro distances himself from it.

But it is not, of course, Socrates' theory of piety. Socrates does not believe that piety is merely an economic transaction between human beings and gods. Indeed he seeks, in pushing this theory, a dialectical confirmation of its insufficiency. And he finds such a confirmation here. The understanding of justice which is at or near the core of Euthyphro's piety is, he confirms, a selfless or noble understanding of justice. Any effort to make it merely prudential, contractual, or transactional, will be met with a response of hostility and even revulsion. It would seem that Stasinus (or Socrates) was correct.

Yet Socrates has confirmed not merely that Euthyphro desires to understand his own piety in a moral light. He has confirmed also that the purpose of piety, according to Euthyphro, is the preservation of families and the common things of cities (14b2-5), which

[161] His subsequent reference to "artful" giving (*technikon:* 14e3) underscores the utilitarian and reductionist trajectory of this argument and its premises. For the arts can be understood as, in their essence, amoral. Thus, to understand piety as an "art" is already to strip away some of its moral or devotional character (see Stauffer 2001, 36). The initial division of justice into human and divine, then, seen in the light of the subsequent progression of the argument, was apparently only the first step in the de-moralization of piety (see Bruell 1999, 131-133). For that division—agreed to by Euthyphro, but instigated by Socrates—stripped of piety its connection to human justice, a connection which had been, according to Euthyphro's initial definition of the pious as the (punitively) just, tight and crucial.

is one meaning or interpretation of the common good. If justice is a virtue of service to the common good, then the virtues of piety and justice would seem to be very similar, if not identical. In other words, according to Euthyphro's experience of divinity, once that experience is clarified dialectically, the gods give human beings guidance for how to live that includes, and perhaps includes preeminently, the requirement that we be just or serve the common good. For if it is required that we be pious, and the purpose of piety is the preservation of families and cities, then the preservation of families and cities would seem to provide a standard by which true piety may be judged. Indeed, by that standard, Euthyphro's initial understanding of the pious—according to which he was required to engage single-mindedly in the specific action of prosecuting his father, or according to which he was required to punish all wrongdoers, whoever they might be—would be judged to be faulty. And Socrates seems to imply in his response to Euthyphro that this new understanding of the pious, as that which preserves families and cities, was correct, but that Euthyphro turned away from it in order to make reference to the gratification of the gods through sacrifice and prayer (14b2-c3).

The Conclusion (15b7-16a4)

Socrates pounces. For Euthyphro has been led, shortly after expressing his disdain for a piety of commerce, to agree that the pious is dear to the gods; and Socrates takes this to be a reiteration of, or a relapse into, the earlier (and since discredited) definition of the pious as the dear to the gods. The argument has gone in an enormous circle. It has returned nearly to where it started. "So in saying this," he asked Euthyphro, "will you wonder if it becomes

apparent that your arguments don't stay still but walk about?" (15b7-8).[162] The conversation has been a spectacular failure. The two men must consider again "from the beginning" what the pious is. Socrates, for his part, will not "voluntarily give up out of cowardice until" he learns it.[163]

But this is, of course, unfair to Euthyphro. For Socrates had earlier agreed that the dear-to-the-gods could be safely referred to as an affection, though not as the essence, of the pious: "we won't differ about this," he had assured him (11b3-4). But now he has pounced on Euthyphro, whose only claim was that the pious was dear to the gods, as if he had claimed that the pious was *the* dear to the gods.[164]

This deliberate misrepresentation of Euthyphro's claim, in conjunction with the cheery insult and the pep-talk, is clearly Socrates' way of ending the conversation.[165] For nothing is more demoralizing than going in a circle. It would seem that Socrates has learned what he wanted to learn from Euthyphro, and now it is time to move on.

But if Socrates intends to conclude the conversation, then what follows is strange. For the rest of the dialogue—or monologue, at this point—consists in a plea and a lament. Socrates seems almost desperate to learn the pious from Euthyphro. When the prophet declines and departs with a vague excuse, we get the impression of Socrates calling after him in pained soliloquy: Euthyphro is "throwing him down" from a "great hope" that he had. What does he mean by this "great hope"? He reiterates all of his reasons for wanting to learn the pious, and the dialogue ends.

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[162] Alternatively: "Will you worship (*thaumasai*), if it would become apparent to you that the arguments don't stay still but walk about?"—which would have the interesting implication of calling attention to the limitations of the dialogue.
[163] Socrates seems to imply that he will, upon learning the pious, give up in some way.
[164] See Blits 1980, 35, Versenyi 1982, 120, Lewis 1985, 62.
[165] See Lewis (1985, 62), who explains this method as "calculated to hasten the prophet's departure."

Surely this final lament is meant to be taken as ironic. But is it merely ironic? There is, indeed, such a thing as exoteric irony.[166] But if there is some serious meaning to the lament, what could it be?

The lament recalls, in tone, a strange sentiment expressed by Socrates at the conclusion of the comic interlude. He had said there that he was "involuntarily wise." For he "would wish rather for the speeches to stay still for me and to be placed unmoved, than, in addition to the wisdom of Daedalus, to get the money of Tantalus" (11d7-e1). But that statement—coming, as it did, in the wake of the failure by Euthyphro to stick with his definition of the pious as the dear to the gods—can mean only one thing: Socrates, far from debunking the prophet with unqualified glee, would apparently *prefer* to be the recipient of a coherent and convincing account of piety and divinity. He would prefer to abandon "the wisdom of Daedalus"—that is, part of his philosophic wisdom—if it would mean avoiding "the money of Tantalus"—eternal punishment.[167] The question of the gods, then, was not of merely theoretical interest for Socrates.

If we return to his final lament with these observations in mind, we notice a striking ambiguity. For in the final line of the dialogue, Socrates remarks that he had hoped, having learned the pious and the divine things from Euthyphro, "especially that I would live better for the rest of my life" (16a3-4). But this final statement might also be translated: "especially that I would better live another/the other life" (*kai dē kai ton allon bion hoti ameinon biosoimēn*). Perhaps, then, Socrates' expression of his "great hope" was not in the final analysis ironic but rather sincere. Perhaps even Socrates, who claimed that the unexamined life was not

[166] For instance, at 5c5-8: "[I know] that neither this Meletus nor, no doubt, anyone else even seems to see you; but me he discerns so sharply and easily that he has indicted me for impiety." See also Lewis 1985, 238.

[167] For stealing ambrosia, feeding his son to the gods at a banquet, or stealing a dog made of gold, Tantalus was punished with eternal hunger and thirst in Tartarus.

worth living, felt the allure of trading his wisdom, or what seemed to him to be wisdom, for providential protection and immortality.[168] Socrates' final lament serves at any rate to emphasize, in the final words of the dialogue, that his interest in the gods was intimately bound up with his desire to know how to live, and live well.

[168] Consider in this context also 9b2-4: If Euthyphro can teach Socrates sufficiently about how the gods are disposed in his case, Socrates will "never stop" extolling him for wisdom.

Chapter Four:
Plato's Understanding of Piety

What conclusions can we draw from Plato's *Euthyphro*? In particular, what conclusions can we draw with regard to Plato's understanding of the nature of piety and its connection with moral opinions? In addition, what light can be shed by the *Euthyphro* on the aim of dialectics more generally? Before turning to those questions, I want to mention a few limitations of the analysis presented in this dissertation. For the phenomenon of piety is complex, and the analysis of a single Platonic dialogue cannot help but neglect certain aspects of it.

The Limitations

First, there are several elements of the human soul, apart from moral opinions, which appear to have some connection with piety. A fuller consideration of those elements, and the Platonic dialogues in which they are treated in more detail, would be necessary to do justice to the nature of piety.

Plato indicates that the love of one's own, for instance, and especially family love, are connected with piety, and may even serve as one root of it (see *Laws* 729c5-8). Our love for

our spouses and children, especially, may predispose us to hope that, even when we cannot protect them, something else will. But the love of one's own is not a primary theme of the *Euthyphro*. Euthyphro is not a family man. He is engaged in the prosecution of his own father for murder. Nor is he in any obvious way an Athenian patriot. In order to understand more fully the love of one's own, as a potential root of piety, it would be necessary to go beyond the *Euthyphro* in order to investigate Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*.

Plato indicates also that love, not as the love of one's own but as eros, is connected with piety. Eros, understood not only as the love of the noble or beautiful, or as the desire to have the good for oneself always (*Symp.* 206a), but as the desire for a particular beloved, might lead a lover to hope for gods who would support the self-forgetting or self-sacrifice without which love might seem mundane. Euthyphro is not a particularly erotic interlocutor, at least in any conventional sense of the word. In the whole of the *Euthyphro,* there is only a single reference to eros. But Socrates, whose wisdom consisted wholly in an understanding of eros (*Thg.* 128b), learned from a prophetess that a daemon was the link between human beings and gods; and the only daemon to which he made reference in the context of that teaching was eros (*Symp.* 202d-203a, 206a-c, 206e-207a). Moreover, each of the major religions speaks of the love of god.[169] The *Euthyphro* by itself, however, may not do justice to the importance of the connection between piety and eros.

Finally, thumos, the natural spiritedness which gives rise to anger, competitiveness, and the defense of one's own, may be connected with piety. Thumos is one root of the

[169] "And you shall love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5). "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:8). "Say, [O Muhammad], 'If you should love Allah , then follow me, [so] Allah will love you and forgive you your sins. And Allah is Forgiving and Merciful' " (*Quran* 3:31). "Being freed from attachment, fear and anger, being fully absorbed in Me and taking refuge in Me, many, many persons in the past became purified by knowledge of Me—and thus they all attained transcendental love for Me" (*Bhagavad-gita* 4.10). For a contemporary account, see Kirkpatrick, *Attachment, Evolution, and the Psychology of Religion,* 2005, 52-80.

desire to punish the unjust. The most detailed and compelling proof of the existence of providential gods in the Platonic corpus is presented in the context of a description of the penal laws of an ideal city (*Laws* Book X, cf. Pangle 1976, 1062 fn. 11, as well as 1060). The whole of Book Ten of the *Laws*, in which that proof is presented, is bookended by references to what is one's own, and specifically to the injustice of taking what belongs to others (884a1-5 and 913a1-5). Thumos can support our conviction that we deserve to retain what is ours (Lutz 1998, 142), and the gods may have some role to play in supporting the plausibility of that conviction. But for a fuller account of thumos, again, we would need to turn away from the *Euthyphro* and toward the *Republic* and the *Laws*.

To understand piety more fully, of course, we would not only need to go beyond Plato's *Euthyphro*. We would need to go beyond the bounds of the Platonic corpus. For neither Plato nor Socrates ever encountered the biblical God or the sacred texts that declare His existence. What Socrates infers on the basis of his conversations with believers in the Greek gods might shed little light on, indeed might be wholly inapplicable with regard to, the God of the Bible and those who believe in Him. To do justice to piety, we would need to supplement our analysis here with a study of the Bible and the Quran, along with the works of al-Farabi, Maimonides, and Aquinas. It is Plato's openness to, and seriousness about, the possibility of the existence of gods that renders him a helpful guide in exploring the questions of piety and divinity. It is his lack of awareness of the biblical monotheisms that renders his guidance questionable.

The Lessons of the Euthyphro

While keeping the preceding limitations in mind, we turn to the following question: What lessons can we learn from the *Euthyphro* about the nature of piety, and especially about its connection with moral opinions?

I would suggest that the *Euthyphro* implies a Platonic thesis about the tight connection between moral opinions and piety. For Plato has chosen, as the only interlocutor in his dialogue on piety—that is, as his representative of piety—a vehemently moral man, speaking in the heat of a punitive moral passion, determined to fulfill impartially the requirements of distributive justice by prosecuting his own father for murder. His first definition of the pious implies that the pious is equivalent to (punitive) justice (5d8-5e2). Even after being pushed away from this definition and toward a second one, he refuses to separate his piety from his moral opinions (10d4-8, cf. 6d1-4, 7a2-5). The gods in whom Euthyphro believes appear to be, of necessity, gods who respect justice and command just actions. Later in the dialogue, Euthyphro agrees to a definition that holds the pious to be a subset of the just (12d4). He then refuses to accept an account of piety as prudential, self-interested, and contractual rather than noble or selfless (13d10-14e8). And in the course of that refusal, he indicates that the very purpose or goal of piety may be the common good (14b4-5). This may imply that in his opinion, once that opinion is clarified dialectically, the virtue of piety is equivalent to, or is a subset of, the virtue of justice, understood as service to the common good.

By presenting the representative of piety in this way, Plato may indicate his own suspicion that moral opinion is a necessary accompaniment or condition of piety. The key moment in the dialogue, according to this account, would be Euthyphro's explicit refusal to

untether the gods from a fixed standard, a standard he has identified with the *idea* of justice (10d4-8). In other words, Euthyphro refuses to allow the pious, understood as what the gods require of human beings, to be determined simply by the will of the gods. Despite his substantial deviation from the Athenian religious tradition, the new deviation toward which Socrates prods him—that he adopt or endorse a belief in gods who are willful rather than moral, who can require human beings to do things that are not just—proves to be too great for him. By witnessing Euthyphro's refusal to untether the gods from the standard or *idea* of justice, Plato's Socrates, for his part, may increase his suspicion that piety is by its nature a moral phenomenon.

The analysis presented here of the *Euthyphro* may therefore give some weight to the suggestion that Mark Lilla, rather than Tocqueville, is correct in his account of the nature of piety. Recall that in his discussion of the seed of piety, Tocqueville stressed only the desire for immortality and the scorn for life. Lilla, on the other hand, in rejecting Hobbesian religious psychology and warning of the threat of political theology, stressed the inextricability of moral concerns from piety. Plato, for his part, has presented us, in his only dialogue devoted explicitly to the subject of piety, with a representative of piety who refuses repeatedly to sever the connection between morality and what he experiences of divinity. By choosing this type of interlocutor, and depicting this repeated refusal, Plato may indicate a tight and even necessary connection between piety and moral opinion. If piety itself is necessarily moral, and if the gods who are plausible objects of belief necessarily respect and even require moral action, then the rise of an amoral faith may not be much of a threat.[170] The fears to which we were led by Tocqueville's account of piety—that the natural seed of

[170] Perhaps even pantheism, or the divine universe in which pantheists believe, is not so amoral as we initially supposed.

piety might give rise only to an amoral faith, a faith which did not support moral action and thereby civic health in a democracy—would therefore seem to be misguided.

Unfortunately, Lilla's pessimism about the fragility of liberalism (on account of the perennial threat of political theology), along with the rejection of Hobbesian religious psychology on which that pessimism was grounded, seem to receive some support from Plato's account. If piety is necessarily a belief in gods who are concerned with justice, then piety is indeed, as Lilla implied, entwined with opinions about justice. But are they general opinions (justice exists, justice is good, justice requires punishing wrongdoers) or specific opinions (justice requires the imposition of a particular divine code in political life)? If they are only general opinions, perhaps the allure and threat of political theology will not be so great. But it must be granted that a god concerned with justice, in general, is likely to be concerned with the specifics of justice, or is likely to give specific commands as to how justice is to be carried out. So perhaps Lilla is right to imply that there is something more natural, given the nature of piety, about political theology than about liberalism. For liberalism, and liberal theology, at least in certain forms, tries to assure us that religion or God need not have any bearing on our political life. Yet political life is in large part a striving for justice; and if the gods are concerned with justice, and wise, they will always be a compelling source of guidance for how to be just in specific circumstances, or for what our political life requires. In other words, it may be a likely—if not a necessary—consequence of the moral nature of piety, that believers will tend to look to the gods, who are gods of justice, for guidance as to what is required in political life.

The Aim of Dialectics

I want to conclude with some brief remarks about the aim of Socratic dialectics. What is Socrates aiming to accomplish in the dialogues, and what light can the *Euthyphro* shed on his efforts? In order to understand more fully this question and its implications, we ought to consider briefly two recent and insightful books on the aim of dialectics.

According to David Leibowitz in *The Ironic Defense of Socrates* (2010), which I have already to some extent discussed, Socrates attempts through dialectics to confirm his theory that the pious experience "rests on" certain "false beliefs about the noble" (88), which "provide the foundation" for that experience "or for the interpretation of the experience *as* divine" (96). By observing that moral opinions accompany firsthand accounts of pious experience, Socrates can increase "his suspicion or confidence" that those divine experiences "*invariably* rest on moral beliefs" (96). A confirmation of this Socratic theory about the relationship between moral opinions and pious experience, then, might enable a debunking of the evidence for the gods' existence: Socrates "thinks he understands what in us calls out to gods and believes it hears back" (98). He suspects "that these experiences arise from beliefs about the noble (what we would call moral beliefs), or at least come to be interpreted as divine on the *basis* of moral beliefs, but not being certain, he is eager for confirmation" (93), a confirmation he seeks through dialectics. Indeed, while Leibowitz sometimes refers only to Socrates' "suspicion or confidence" in his theory, he also refers repeatedly to the possibility of confirming the theory (88, 93, 98, see also 70, 73, and 86-7) and even to the possibility of answering or settling the question of the gods' existence (71, cf. 70). But is that possible? To what extent *can* Socratic dialectics shed light on the existence or non-existence of the gods?

In his book *Socrates' Education to Virtue* (1998), Mark Lutz provides a somewhat similar account of the aim of dialectics. According to Lutz, Socrates can confirm, through conversations, his knowledge of the soul, insofar as he can show that an interlocutor's concern with noble things is rooted in the same erotic desire that moves Socrates, namely the desire to know how to be noble and good, the desire to be noble and good, or the desire to know that one is noble and good (124-5). This confirmation is at the same time, or in other words, a confirmation of what Socrates "learned about eros from talking with Diotima" (125). What Socrates learned from Diotima was that he loved *to kalon* (the noble) insofar as it seemed to him to be good, or to be a means to the good, especially the good of immortality (103, 107, cf. 89). In other words, Socrates has "a rich and subtle account of the *psyche*" (109) which inclines him to believe that the concern for noble things is an experience brought about by eros, understood as a force in the human soul, rather than by divine inspiration (107). The aim of dialectics is at least in part to confront the possibility that this "psychological" account of the nature of the human concern for noble things is incorrect; that is, the possibility that "others have experienced inspirations or divinations that reveal more fully the true human situation" (107, cf. 123); that is, the possibility that "eros is a divine power that moves us to love things other than our own well-being in a way that is beyond the ken of merely human reason" (89).

But can Socrates in fact come to possess, through dialectics, knowledge of the truth of his account of the human concern for noble things, as a natural or erotic phenomenon? Lutz seems to waver as to what, precisely, dialectics can accomplish. At first, he says that Socrates' association with Alcibiades "confirms his knowledge of the soul and of its virtue" (146). But soon he seems to backtrack: "Socrates' success in examining Alcibiades' soul by itself does not prove that Socrates knows the soul and its virtue. For even if Alcibiades' eros

resembles that of Socrates, this does not rule out the possibility that there are other kinds of human beings whose devotion to the noble things is rooted in something other than an eros to be noble and good" (149). Presumably this other root of devotion would be divine, given what Lutz has implied about divine inspiration as a challenge to Socratic psychology (107, 123, cf. 89). If there are always more human beings to examine, whose experiences might challenge the Socratic account of the concern for noble things, then Socrates could presumably never truly confirm his opinions about the soul or transform those opinions into knowledge.

But Lutz shifts again: "In order for Socrates to confirm his knowledge of the soul and his own nobility and goodness, he must examine and consider those who care deeply for justice" (149). The aim of dialectics is at least in part to test whether others might "experience the nobility of justice or other virtues differently than do Socrates and Alcibiades. How can Socrates know whether others sense or know something about justice that he does not and that calls into question his identification of virtue with philosophic wisdom?" (149, cf. 177, where prudence is said to be the only genuine virtue of the soul). The answer to this question is that Socrates can confirm his knowledge of the soul through dialectics (149). Yet the problem would seem to remain: how could those examinations or considerations result in, or even be expected to result in, anything other than the strengthening of a hypothesis, which must remain a hypothesis? How could that hypothesis ever be confirmed as, or transformed into, knowledge? No matter how many times Socrates proved that a particular interlocutor's love or concern for noble things depended on his opinions about what was noble and good (145, cf. 89, 108, 125, 139, 169, 170, 175), there would always be more potential interlocutors, who might disprove the hypothesis. Moreover, any claim about dependence, conditionality, or causality, even in the case of a

single interlocutor's soul, would be open to the kind of challenge that Lutz, like Leibowitz, is well aware of (125, cf. Leibowitz 2010 66-67 fn. 31), namely the challenge that a knowledge of conditions or causes is unavailable to human beings.

Each account, that of Leibowitz and that of Lutz, implies in its own way that Socrates sought, through dialectics, to increase his confidence that moral opinion was a condition or a cause of piety. These accounts receive a substantial amount of support from Plato's *Euthyphro*. But I would stress—more than either theorist, and more unequivocally—the inevitably hypothetical or speculative character of Socrates' theory about piety. Often, Lutz himself emphasizes the "hypothetical" character of Socrates' theory about the soul, eros, and the concern for noble things (124-5, cf. 178, 181, 183), and Leibowitz refers, at several points, to Socrates' "suspicion" or "reasonable confidence." When they limit their arguments in this way, I would agree with them. The Socratic understanding of piety is necessarily a hypothesis, a theory. Through dialectics, Socrates might increase his confidence in that theory, or witness its resilience in the face of potential refutations, but he could never confirm its truth or transform it into knowledge in the strict sense.[171]

In addition to this goal, dialectics might allow Socrates to attain knowledge that, in the case of a particular interlocutor's experience, the gods, if they do exist, had not provided knowledge of how to live—even in the eyes of that interlocutor himself. For Euthyphro's evident confusion, dismay, and anger, on being asked to clarify what he means by the pious,

[171] On the definition of knowledge, see Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139b18-23. In stressing the modesty of what the philosopher can know about the divine, I depart from the analysis of Marlo Lewis, who writes that the *Euthyphro* "contains a cogent refutation of the city's authoritative opinions about the gods" (1985, 225, compare 245-246) and that "philosophy is the pursuit of wisdom only if knowledge of ignorance includes the knowledge that 'Zeus is not' " (230). It seems to me that such knowledge is unavailable to human beings, and that the apparent refutations of the existence of the traditional gods that Lewis finds within the *Euthyphro* are not compelling (see pages 116 and 126-7 above, along with Lewis 1985, 231: "The chief conclusion to be drawn from the second part [of the dialogue] is that the gods, if they exist, neither rule nor care for us").

indicate that whatever guidance he has received, assuming he has indeed received guidance, does not rise to the level of knowledge. It would be necessary to confirm that the interlocutor himself had, as a result of dialectics, lost some of his confidence that the gods had supplied him with knowledge of how to live. For in doing so, Socrates could rule out the possibility that the guidance supplied by the gods to a particular man, while remaining opaque to outside observers like philosophers, was in fact experienced as knowledge by that man—perhaps because he had been given some form of privileged access or understanding by the gods or by his upbringing (see *Laws* 632d1-7). Moreover, Socrates could confirm that the interlocutor himself was bothered by his lack of knowledge, that is, dissatisfied with any divine guidance which did not rise to the level of knowledge or which was not truly intelligible to him.

But this type of refutation would not be a refutation of the existence of divinities or divine contact. Socrates would need to remain open to the possibility that gods exist. His famous daimonion, in fact, might serve to represent that openness.[172] Or, to put it another way, the daimonion might serve as a reminder to Socrates and to others that the existence of

[172] The daimonion might also represent something else. If the gods require justice or nobility, that is, moral virtue, and if dialectics can reveal that moral virtue is understood to be good for those who are moral (see Lutz 1998, 165 cf. 164, 170, 175), then perhaps the difference between the divine experience of Socrates and the divine experience of Euthyphro, to which we were directed by the opening of the *Euthyphro* (3b-c), can to some extent be explained. Euthyphro's contact with the gods directs him to undertake actions that are just. He feels compelled to punish his father and to offer advice in the democratic assembly. Socrates' contact with the gods, by contrast, directs him to undertake actions that are prudent or simply good for him. He feels compelled to avoid an entry into politics, that is, to avoid an early death (*Ap.* 31c-d). Socrates, who had presumably clarified his moral opinions to himself, no longer experienced the voice of divinity to advise anything other than the pursuit of what was best. Was this a deviation from normal revelatory experience? Or perhaps a clarification of it? The daimonion might serve to represent the way in which the experience of divinity, or the commands of the gods, would appear to a person who had clarified his moral opinions to himself, or who had seen that virtue is by definition something good. The command to be virtuous, in that case, would not ultimately require a deviation from prudence or the pursuit of what is intelligibly good or best. Compare Taylor 1982, 117.

the gods could never be disproven. Nor could one prove the more modest claim that moral opinions are a necessary condition of pious experience. Of the existence or non-existence of the gods, a philosopher would need to remain ignorant, and knowledge or science would include or entail the full recognition and internalization of that ignorance. The knowledge that Socrates came to possess, after all, was merely human wisdom (*Ap.* 20d-e). But that means that the attempt to use dialectics as a means of shoring up the possibility of science, understood as knowledge of fixed and unchanging natures which could not be altered by the miraculous intervention of the divine, would be overly hopeful. Science, on this account, has a very limited scope: our lit-up realm of certainty or clarity is hemmed in by a vast darkness. But precisely in recognizing the vastness and the character of that darkness, we transform it, to a limited extent, into something known.

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